

Book Review

Weiss, Anita. W., *Countering Violent Extremism in Pakistan: Local Actions, Local Voices*. 312pp. Oxford University Press 2021.

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Society in Pakistan has been facing the impact of radicalisation and violent extremism for the last many decades. One can argue about the exact starting date, but the widespread radicalisation of religious ideas can be witnessed during the regime of General Zia ul Haq (1977-1988). Radicalisation since then has emphasised religious-political exclusion and has prevailed throughout society, including supporting militants' ambitions at the Afghan and Kashmir borders. The situation even became aggravated under General Musharraf, who came to power after toppling the elected government of Nawaz Sharif in 1999. Since 9/11, society has had to bear the brunt of violence which has taken away over eighty thousand human lives, including figures such as Benazir Bhutto and Mufti Sarfraz Ahmed Naeemi (Basit 2015:45). The unchecked growth of Islamist groups has heightened radicalisation in the political and cultural spheres as well, increasing hatred against non-Muslims and resulting in violence against minority religious groups and sects. Futile as it would be to identify the factors behind this increased radicalisation and resultant violence, Pakistan society has had to remain content with the state's sporadic actions for de-radicalisation and countering terrorism. Even when devising plans such as the National Action Plan and Counter-Terrorism Operations the initiatives of the Pakistani state remained selective and fraught with problems.¹ On the other hand, it has been surprising to see the quickness with which Pakistani society has regained its lost balance and has shown its readiness to live for peace, progress, and development once the situation at the borders reduced the strategic needs of national and international forces to use the militant radical groups for their own ends.

The starting point for Professor Anita Weiss's book, *Countering Violent Extremism in Pakistan*, is precisely this ability of

Pakistani society to reconnect with its indigenous culture and traditions. Instead of focusing on state policies for countering violent extremism,² her research focuses on non-state actors, NGOs and individuals to show that social and cultural activities lessen the risks of violence and extremism. Based on ethnographic work in three of the four provinces of Pakistan (the security situation precluded a visit to Balochistan), each of the main chapters deals with a distinct theme—Poetry, Music & Theatre, Art, Innovative Educational Efforts, Interfaith Religious Activities, and Communal Works. The Introduction provides an overall justification for the book. Her work draws on Abdul Basit's broad understanding of religious extremism, including "... sectarianism, shariah movements, Talibanisation, and a multitude of the jihadist organisation" and a "... general opposition to American or Western policies, in the nationalist-separatist insurgency in Balochistan and ethnopolitical violence in Karachi and parts of interior Sindh" (Basit 2015:47).³ However, this broad understanding hides the forces triggering the violent extremism and confuses recent events with issues that are as old as the ideologically motivated birth of Pakistan (Jaffrelot 2015:257).⁴

The first chapter describes the living traditions of Pashto and Sindhi poetry that resist the mindset created by pro-Taliban theological tendencies. Focusing on the working of the Bacha Khan Educational Trust and the individuals attached to or aligned with its ideological narrative, the chapter highlights the poetry and the *mushairas* that counter the radical influences that have infiltrated into people's religious consciousness. Contrary to popular perceptions regarding the Pashtuns as a "militant" community, the chapter demonstrates through the poetry of Rehman Baba, ANP workers, academic scholars, and a female poet-activist that Pashtun culture always aspires for peace. Sindhi poetic expressions, embedded

in the sufistic traditions of Sachal Sarmast and Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai, also counter religious extremism by promoting religious diversity.

The second chapter starts with a discussion of the activities of four musicians from various parts of Pakistan: Saif Samejo, Taimur Rehman, Gulab Khel Afridi, and Karan Khan. Along with individual performers, the chapter also gives details regarding the activities of performing groups such as Ajoka, IRC (International Resource Center), Da To Saaro Saadar, and Pushkalavati Theater Company to show the way these activities help people to learn how to take a stand against extremism. The author believes that it was “only after the promulgation of Zia ul Haq’s Islamisation programme... (that) music and performance ... (have)periodically been attacked by those who see them as un-Islamic.” She is conscious that music and performance have emerged in the last few years as vital means of recapturing local traditions and reclaiming the authentic identity of Pakistan. However, she does not explore the reasons for this recent interest. In fact, when one considers the difficulties that Faiz Ahmed Faiz and others faced when making a case for music and the arts from independence on, and the fact that the National Council of Arts was not set up until 1972, it becomes difficult to accept her overall chronology (Salim and Ishfaq 2013).

The third chapter highlights the use of art to reclaim the identity and meaning of the context. It gives interesting details about individual artists and NGOs who have engaged in projects such as Reimagining the Walls of Karachi, Rang Dey Karachi and ‘I am Karachi’, which are aimed at beautifying the walls of the city. The chapter also discusses similar activities in other parts of the country, such as in Bahawalpur and Lahore. It is here in Lahore where the reader suddenly discovers the dangers and limits of what appear on the surface to be politically neutral activities through the story of Raza Khan and the Awami Art Collective. Khan was abducted at the end of 2017 and detained for seven months by the intelligence agencies, thus showing the limits of freedom of expression and the possibility of getting chastised for overstepping them.

Although the Introduction says that the book does not intend to explore reasons for religious extremism, the fifth chapter, “Religion itself counters Extremism,” does in fact begin by giving some historical background in a section headed “Backdrop on Why Violent Extremism Often Focuses on Religious Differences,” although it does not include the most recent developments. Factors identified as leading to heightened intolerance include: a tilt towards Saudi Arabia since 1979, religious narratives generated by the extremist groups, and the victory of the Islamist coalition, the Muttahida Majlis e Amal (MMA) in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2003. The chapter also mentions three state actions that have contributed to extremism and intolerance in Pakistan: the move away from Jinnah’s liberal and secular vision to that of the 1949 Objectives Resolution; the Second Amendment to the 1973 Constitution that declared Ahmadis to be non-Muslim; and the

state actors’ response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. Passing over the period of General Musharraf’s rule, the chapter describes the increased hatred against religious minorities and the activities of such organisations as the Interfaith Council for Peace and Harmony, a state-based organisation working with the Ministry of Religious Affairs, and non-Muslim groups such as the Christian Study Centre (CSC) and Right of Expression, Assembly, Association and Thought (REAT).

The book introduces the reader to the problems of education and to communal and social action in the sixth and seventh chapters respectively. Focusing on the gap between the modernist Jinnah’s emphasis on education and the state of Pakistan’s strategic engagement with education throughout its history as a means to pursue nationalistic goals, the author discusses the problems of education and poor literacy levels in Pakistan. She argues that because of this strategic engagement with education, the syllabus for government schools has promoted a certain form of Islamic teachings that is intolerant towards religious minorities. By drawing upon the activities of the Bacha Khan Educational Trust and the Zoya School Project, both of which started in 2007, the book shows that there is the potential in today’s Pakistan to create a new generation with an openness to scientific rationality, religious diversity and responsibility towards one’s country.

This book is a valuable ethnographic survey of the NGOs and civil society organisations that make up an influential section of the public sphere. It successfully follows its announced goal, that is to bring to the fore voices of Pakistanis “who want their culture back, their lives back and wish to live collectively without violence.” This path was chosen to reimagine Pakistan as a land of peace and harmony for an international reader. It gathers and provides a lot of interesting information regarding the activities of many NGOs and professionals. However, the work would have been improved by a greater focus both on the factors that have led to the rise of violent extremism and on developments that are giving birth to new social movements, as well as on the limits on the latter’s activities in reconnecting with the history and culture of Pakistan.

References:

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Footnotes:

[1] Isa, Qazi Faez. 2016. *Quetta Inquiry Commission Report*. Supreme Court of Pakistan.

[2] The Obama Administration dubbed its counter domestic radicalisation strategy as Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) for the first time in 2011. The Administration also released its Strategic Implementation Plan for Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States (SIP). The SIP targeted engagement with local groups that were showing tendencies for coming under the influence of Al-Qaida's propaganda. The SIP asks for Oversight by Congress for the "Rules of the Road" and emphasises the need for differentiating between radicalisation and violent extremism (Bjelopera 2014).

[3] Abdul Basit, however, recommends these broad themes to make a case for introducing the national CVE (Countering Violent Extremism) policies to overcome the challenge of extremism that could evade the state's on-going policies of counter-terrorism.

[4] It is also important to distinguish between the two periods: from 1979 and 1999, and since 9/11. The periods reflect different forms of emphasis in the social and cultural sphere and resultantly different forms of radicalisation and violence. In the presence of active US engagement in Afghanistan, the militancy was a heroic effort to liberate the country from the bad influences of Russia. 9/11 was an act of terrorism. Pakistan now appeared both as a frontline territory fighting against terrorism and also as providing support to the militants.
