

SUFI THOUGHT IN SINDH: A LIBERAL COUNTER NARRATIVE TO EXTREMISM AND TERRORISM

Madiha Abbas^{*1}, Mushtaque Ali Abbasi², Ghulam Shabbir³

^{*1}PhD. Scholar/Visiting Lecturer, Department of History & Pakistan Studies, University of Gujrat, Gujrat, Punjab, Pakistan

²Lecturer, Department of History & Pakistan Studies, University of Gujrat, Gujrat, Punjab, Pakistan

³Assistant Professor, Department of History & Pakistan Studies, University of Gujrat, Gujrat, Punjab, Pakistan

¹25016151-003@uog.edu.pk, ²mushtaque.abbasi@uog.edu.pk, ³ghulam.shabbir@uog.edu.pk

Corresponding Author: *

Madiha Abbas

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ABSTRACT

The Sufi culture of Sindh, which is based on devotional poetry and shrine culture as well as the everyday inter-communal piety, has long expressed an ethic of compassion, plural belonging, and nonviolence. It is argued in this paper that Sufi thinking in Sindh is a liberal counter-narrative to extremism and terrorism because (a) love and service (ishq/khidmat) are placed at the center of Sufi thinking, (b) religious plurality is normalized by shared sacred spaces and syncretic practices, and (c) communities are mobilized against sectarianization through their cultural productions (kafis, wai, dhamal, and urs). Based on the academic research concerning Sindhi Sufism and translation/hybridity, the saints of Sufi and shrine ecology, the paper will suggest a qualitative approach that combines both textual study of Sufi poetry and interpretive study of the practices and discourse of the shrines. The discussion also brings out the weaknesses and strengths of the Sufi counter-narrative frameworks in the context of community ownership and protection against instrumentalization.

INTRODUCTION

Sindh province plays a unique role in the religious and cultural history of South Asia, which can be explained by its strongly established Sufi culture. The cultural tradition has had a significant influence on the social norms and ethical worldview of the region and leans towards inter-communal coexistence over centuries. Since the very beginning of the introduction of the Islamic religion into the Indus area, Sufism provided a flexible and inclusive theological system that aligned with the local cultural life and the pre-Islamic spiritualism (Schimmel, 1975; Eaton, 2000). Instead of emphasizing strict dogma or

legalism, Sindhi Sufism prefigured such values as love (ishq), humility, tolerance, and service to humanity (khidmat) that became part of the daily experience of the population due to the works of poetry, music, shrine ceremonies, and oral narratives (Kothari, 2017; Ansari, 2011). This way, such traditions made Sufism a social ethic that was lived and not merely a mystical system or a philosophical one.

Social cohesion, religious plurality, and internal security are critical challenges faced by Pakistan in the current context due to the emergence of religious extremism and terrorism (Jawad &

Shabbir, 2025). Extremist ideologies are often based on exclusivist views of religion that justify violence, encourage sectarian hatred, and oppose cultural diversity (Fair, 2014; Abbas, 2011). This is supported by binary oppositions: believer/unbeliever and orthodox/heretical, and there is barely room to live together or communicate. Sufi belief, in its turn, focuses more on interior spiritual reform and moral self-control and considers the use of violence and force as the attributes of the uninhibited ego (nafs) rather than religious piety (Schimmel, 1975; Ernst, 1997). Such an ethical disposition makes Sufism a head-on ideological confrontation with extremist worldviews.

Sufi traditions have both symbolic and practical value as counter-narratives: such a tendency can be seen in the multiple attacks of militant groups in Pakistan on Sufi shrines. The 2017 suicide bombing incident at the shrine of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar in Sehwan, which killed dozens of worshippers, is an example of how violence by extremist groups is aimed at destroying the places of pluralism, collective exultation, and pluralistic expression of religion (Dawn, 2017; France, 2017). According to scholars, these are not ordinary acts of terrorism but calculated attacks on the other visions of Islam that weaken the power of militants and control over ideologies (Abbas, 2011; Fair, 2014). Sindhi shrines serve as not only a religious hub but also a social venue where social stratifications are diluted and there are multiple identities colliding with each other, making them a significant source of opposing sectarianism.

Sindhi Sufism is always described in academic literature as pluralistic and culturally hybrid. Kothari (2017) defines Sufism in Sindh as a being-in-translation and focuses on the way Sufism creates its meanings constantly through the process of language, cultural, and religious exchange. This hybridity enables the Sufi traditions to move beyond the strict identity lines and continue to be open to both Muslims and non-Muslims. Saints and poets like Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai explained moral lessons focused on compassion, justice, and empathy to the marginalized, reinforcing an all-encompassing social ethic that still has an impact on Sindhi society (Narejo, 2021; Ansari, 2011). The poetry of

Bhittai, especially, attacks the vices of arrogance, love of wealth, and bloodshed and has been known to proclaim humility and love in its spiritual excellence.

Moreover, the Sindh shrine culture has traditionally promoted interfaith community by sharing sacred places. The involvement of Hindus in the cult of Muslim Sufi saints and the common celebration of shrine holidays are recorded in literature, and the tradition of religious syncretism is deeply rooted (Pakistan Institute of Development Economics [PIDE] 2018; Eaton, 2000). This kind of common practice undermines the extremist ideas of religious difference as a precondition to social segregation or antagonism. The recent research on common sacred places, including Udero/Jhule/Lal, has shown how these places are also common daily tolerant and social integration processes within Sindh (Shah, 2024). This article claims that Sufi ideology in Sindh is a liberal counter-discourse to extremism and terrorism, not as a Western political doctrine or ideology but as a traditionally based culture that embraces human dignity, pluralism, and nonviolence. The analysis is based on the existing literature on Sufi poetry, rituals, and common sacred spaces to combat the discourses of extremist politics and resilience to radicalization (Makkiz, 2015; Mirahmadi et al., 2015; Suleman, 2018). Meanwhile, the paper critically intersects on the discussion of the instrumentalization of Sufism as part of the state-led counter-extremism campaigns and makes it clear that the Sufi traditions are the most useful as a counter-narrative when they are not security-centric and politicized (Shahid, 2016). In this discussion, the paper aims to argue that the Sufi tradition of Sindh has provided a plausible and native platform of peacebuilding and offers a long-term alternative to the violent extremism principles.

Literature Review

It is generally accepted that Sufism cannot be narrowed down to an interior spiritual practice; it exists concurrently as a social practice that develops moral communities using rituals, pedagogies, poetry, and institutions like khanqahs and shrines (Ernst, 1997; Schimmel, 1975). The classical Sufi teaching anticipates the

metamorphosis of self, especially the training of the *nafs*, and the development of such virtues as humility, compassion, patience, and love. This has a very great implication on counter-extremism scholars, as this ethical inclination has been changed to the point of religious earnestness, where coercion and boundary policing are no longer the most important, like in the context of moral self-reform (Ernst, 1997; Schimmel, 1975). Sufi networks in South Asia traditionally provided ready idioms of devotion and community-making, which were often imbedded in local languages and cultural forms (Eaton, 2000), and thus generated traditions that often co-existed with a variety of religious publics.

Sindhia Literature on Sufism: Literature has placed special emphasis on Sindhia Sufism because of its ability to sustain multiple layered identities and various devotional registers. One of the key contributions is that Sufi culture is theorized by Kothari as a being-in-translation, with Sufi praxis arising through the interlacing of languages and religious traditions and in a constant state of meaning-making instead of fixing in an orthodoxy (Kothari, 2017). The given framing is particularly relevant to the process of comprehending the way in which Sindh Sufism operates as a counter-narrative: typically, extremist ideologies require exclusive and rigid identities, and in-translation religiosity allows having the overlap, plurality of interpretation, and mutual vocabularies (Kothari, 2017).

The Sufi legacy of Sindh is also maintained by existing cultural institutions such as poetry, performance, and shrine-based devotional economies that impart ethical principles through the generations. Despite the numerous differences between scholarly approaches, one main similarity is that Sindh Sufi repertoires foster empathy and social compassion by encouraging aesthetics of emotional resonance (poetry and music) and ritual action (pilgrimage, congregational, and festival cycles) (Kothari, 2017). These forms are a kind of public pedagogy, which forms moral imagination not only by the process of teaching but also by the process of sharing affect, of memory, and of place-based belonging.

A sufficiently large part of the scholarship has viewed Sindh saints and poets, especially Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai, as moral leaders whose teachings can be construed to promote peace, tolerance, and an interest in the suffering. As an example, Narejo (2021) interprets the Sufi message of Bhittai as being human-oriented, about social harmony, and about nonviolent ethics and places the Sufi heritage of Sindh as a cultural instrument of coexistence. This academic line of thought is essential due to the fact that counter-narratives are not just messages that compete in an information field; it is a moral economy where communities are informed about what is considered honorable, something sacred, and just (Narejo, 2021). It is in this respect that Sufi poetry and saint worship can be interpreted as those vernacular moral systems that socialize societies towards compassion and restraint.

At the same time, the literature also warns that Sufism should not be romanticized as intolerant in every case. Although numerous researches prefigure inclusive themes of ethics, researchers have also reported that the culture of shrines can present social stratifications, power struggles, and rivalry among ownership of authenticity. What this means for countering extremism is that Sufi resources are most useful when having their plural ethics upheld by plausible institutions and community faith as opposed to projected consequences of mysticism.

The survival of communal holy places and cross-communal worship is one of the most observable empirically parts of the Sufi tradition of Sindh. The example of Hindus visiting Muslim shrines in Sindh shows that the veneration of saints can easily cross the borders of the community and offer an effective response to exclusivist arguments that religious distinction requires segregation (Kalhor, 2018). This common devotion is not peripheral; it is inherent in local histories of sacred geography and popular religiosity, where shrines can serve as places of vow-making, curing, community feasting, and festival-going on behalf of various visitors (Kalhor, 2018).

This argument is furthered by recent case-study studies that concentrate on particular common locations. An example is provided by Shah (2024), who considers the common sacred place of Jhule

Lal/Udero Lal and argues that this place can be used to promote interfaith unity because it allows people to interact with each other, get to know each other, and share a common vocabulary of rituals. Complementary scholarship also recognizes Jhule Lal as a socially significant shared religious space in the Sindh; it also identifies that tolerance can even be manifested as a negotiated practice rather than as a given agreement (Grassroots, 2021). Coupled with such studies, it can be argued that shared sacred spaces are a kind of social infrastructure of pluralism in place: a habitual practice of coexistence, but not an ideal (Shah, 2024; Grassroots, 2021).

The sources on militancy in Pakistan suggest that the extremist violence targets the state as well as symbolic and cultural locations that symbolize alternative religious perspectives. The attack on the shrine of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar in Sehwan (2017) is widely discussed as an attack on the popular culture of worship of associated ideologies, which are perceived as a threat to militant attempts at controlling the ideas of ideological thinking through specific symbols, namely music, collective happiness, and inclusivity in religiosity (Dawn, 2017; France 24, 2017). In this sensitizing frame, shrines are viewed as symbols of contention: as symbols of a communal Islam, they compete with those of a sectarian or puritanical vision of Islam in terms of legitimacy and moral authority (Dawn, 2017; France 24, 2017).

Greater representations of religious extremism in the Pakistan-Afghanistan context highlight the process of militant movements becoming and remaining viable based on exerting the boundaries of identity, the fear, and moral absolutism (Abbas, 2015; Jawad et al., 2025). This scholarship assists us in placing the Sufi counter-narrative assertion in a realist framework: diverse religious cultures can be resilient but at the same time are subject to specific violence, which is exactly the fact that they blurred a monopoly on religious meaning and the everyday existence of people (Abbas, 2015; Dawn, 2017).

The literature on policy and practitioners on countering violent extremism persistently emphasizes the role of credible messengers, locally relevant stories, and community ownership when

these conditions are met, which allows cultural-religious traditions, such as Sufi repertoires, to offer support to the prevention and resilience (Mirahmadi et al., 2015). Nevertheless, there has been much critical scholarly writing to warn that Sufism as a state-controlled instrument can actually be more counter-effective where it is securitized, instrumentalized, or branded as good Islam vs. bad Islam. The post-9/11 situation in Pakistan, in the context of scholarship claims that Sufi Islam, through institutional promotion, has occasionally been accompanied by the emergence of anti-Sufi discourses and an increased struggle over control of religious authority (Shahid, 2016; Suleman, 2018).

This criticism narrows down the main argument of this paper: the Sufi tradition of Sindh can offer a liberal counter-narrative to the issue of extremism, yet it should be effective in terms of authenticity, cultural continuity, and social trust. In the places where the symbols of Sufism are minimized to branding or utilized in top-down messages, the counter-narrative can lose its credibility and even result in backlash (Shahid, 2016; Suleman, 2018). On the other hand, where Sufi ethics are maintained by the corporate institutions of the society, namely, poetry circles, the norms of shrine caretaking, inclusive practices of festivals, and interfaith civic relationships, Sufi thought may serve as a viable vernacular alternative to violent absolutism (Kothari, 2017; Shah, 2024; Kalhor, 2018).

Methodology

The paper takes a strict historical research and descriptive method of research to explore Sufi thought in Sindh as a liberal counter-narrative of extremism and terrorism. The historical approach follows the development of Sufism in Sindh from the early spread of Islam in the Indus Valley to its modern forms, and the descriptive approach chronologically captures and analyzes the beliefs, activities, and social roles of Sufi traditions. Such an integrated approach is specifically suitable to analyze religious and cultural phenomena because it allows grasping the context and describing in detail the lived traditions instead of the causal analysis (Creswell, 2013; Kothari, 2017).

In applying the historical approach, the research uses secondhand historical materials like classical books, translated Sufi poems, personal narrations, and research papers on the Sufism of Sindh. Sufi thought in Sindh is measured by the writings of the most notable Sufi saints—such as Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai and Lal Shahbaz Qalandar—on how they promoted and propagated love (ishq), spiritual egalitarianism, and service to humanity. The history of Islam in South Asia and Sufi orders is a way of locating the Sufi tradition of Sindh in a broader regional and cultural context (Schimmel, 1975; Eaton, 2000; Ernst, 1997). Such historical tracing explains why the encompassing values of Sufism got embedded in the system of the Sindh society throughout history.

The descriptive approach is used to provide a thorough description of the modern Sufi practices in Sindh with a specific focus on shrine-based rites, devotional poetry, music, and collective sacred space. The existing ethnographic research, policy, and case studies are examined to explain how such practices can be used to promote tolerance, interfaith peace, and social unity (Kalhor, 2018; Shah, 2024). There is also a descriptive analysis of the media coverage of militant attacks on Sufi shrines and academic reactions to this situation to highlight the symbolic meaning of these places and their perceived danger to the extremist ideologies (Dawn, 2017; Abbas, 2015). This methodology offers a subtle interpretation of the Sufi philosophy in Sindh as a culturally situated counter-narrative to extremism and terrorism by overlaying historical profundity with descriptive lucidity.

Results and Discussion

According to the results of this research, Sufi thinking in Sindh is the powerful and culturally specific counter-discourse to extremism and terrorism. Instead of out-of-hand dismissing the violent ideologies by direct polemics or theological counter-argument, Sindh Sufism incorporates the extremism on an ethical and social level, reconfiguring the morality, religious fantasy, and everyday activities. As it has been shown in the analysis, the influence of Sufi thinking is not limited to abstract spirituality but is also reflected in poetry, the culture of shrines, shared sacred

spaces, and traditions that, in combination, help to develop tolerance, compassion, and nonviolence.

One of the critical outcomes of this investigation is the prevalence of ethical humanism in the Sindh Sufi philosophy. The philosophy and poetry of the Sufi saints, and in particular Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai, promote love (ishq), humility, patience, and service to man as the highest of the spiritual virtues. Such moral values come into direct conflict with radical ideologies that justify violence, glorify coercion, and propagate narrow sectarian religious interpretations. Whereas extremist discourse favors outer enemies and fixed ethical demarcations, Sufi philosophy favors inner moral renewal and the war against the ego (nafs) and views violence as an indicator of spiritual failure instead of religious devotion (Schimmel, 1975; Ernst, 1997; Narejo, 2021). Such an introverted moral paradigm makes the extremist discourses based on anger, resentment, and absolutism less attractive.

The discussion also clarifies that Sindh Sufism is opposed to extremism because of its pluralistic and hybrid nature. According to the historical and cultural scientific evidence, Sufism in Sindh has changed over time by constantly engaging with the local languages, customs, and religious traditions, thus creating a culture of being-in-translation instead of orthodoxy (Kothari, 2017). This hybridity enables the Sindh Sufi traditions to embrace diversity and multiple identities, and at the same time, it subverts the in-group and out-group ideologies that the extremist movements bank on. Using the concept of religious plurality and cultural mixing (normalizing) to the detriment of the ideological basis of sectarianism and intolerance, Sufi thought in Sindh undermines the ideological underpinnings of sectarianism and intolerance.

The other important consequence is related to the contribution of the culture of shrines as a kind of social and moral infrastructure. The Sindh shrines are a communal area whereby people with various sectarian, ethnic, and religious orientations meet to worship, receive healing, and celebrate collectively. Empirical studies of Hindu involvement in the cult of the Muslim Sufi saints can be used to demonstrate how these spaces can

encourage daily interfaith communication and mutual understanding (Kalhoro, 2018; Pakistan Institute of Development Economics, 2018). These common religious practices make a mockery of the extremist claims that religious difference requires social segregation or enmity. The fact that the militant groups attacked the Sufi shrines several times, such as the attack of the shrine of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar in Sehwan, further testifies that they represent a different threatening vision of Islam based on inclusion and happiness, not fear and control (Dawn, 2017; Abbas, 2015).

It is also noted in the findings that the symbolic power of Sufi rituals, music, and poetry is important in forming a collective emotional life. Dhamaal, urs festivals, devotional singing, and other such practices create emotional experiences of collectivity that propagate solidarity, empathy, and resilience. These practices are starkly different than those of the extremist policies, which aim at capturing fear, grievance, and moral outrage. Sindhi traditions of Sufism reduce the state of affect that in many instances underlies radicalization by developing communal happiness and emotional receptivity (Kothari, 2017; Shah, 2024).

Simultaneously, the discussion realizes the salient limitations and challenges. Although the Sufi thinking provides a strong counter-narrative, it does not always work. Sufism is not to be romanticized, according to scholarship; it has no natural aversion to politicization. Sufism is being instrumentalized by state actors as a counter-extremism instrument, which, in some situations, has elicited a negative response and increased the spread of anti-Sufi messages (Shahid, 2016; Suleman, 2018). This implies that Sufi traditions are best utilized in the role of counter-narratives when they are rooted in the practices of communities, cultural authenticity, and moral credibility instead of using them as top-down methods of security.

On the whole, the findings and discussion demonstrate that Sindhi Sufi thinking does not challenge the logic of extremism in reflection but presents a radically different vision of morality. Plural cultural practices, collective sacred spaces, emotionally touching rituals, toleration, social cohesion, and nonviolence are cultivated through

the Sufism of Sindh through ethical humanism. These results prove the argument that indigenous cultural and religious traditions, in the case of respect and preservation, may become one of the key elements in solving extremism and terrorism in the most credible and socially transformative way.

Conclusion

We have discussed the outlines of Sufi thought in the Sindhi context in this inquiry, which defines the concept as a highly liberal and culturally based counter-narrative of the dominant discourses of extremism and terrorism. The results shed light on how Sindhi Sufism offers a strong alternative based on historical persistence, ethical lessons, poetic renditions, shrine-based activities, and sacred spaces in general to develop values of love, humility, tolerance, and respect for human dignity. These values are the direct antithesis of the absolute morality, sectarianism, and violence-labeling that are active in extremism accounts.

As it has been shown in the analysis, Sufi thinking in Sindh does not oppose extremism by an explicit ideological challenge but by restructuring moral imagination and social relationships. Sindhi Sufism can also be seen as systematically weakening the emotional and moral basis on which radicalization can so often be based by preempting the inner spiritual reform it seeks through external coercion. Furthermore, this counter-narrative is supported by shrine culture and sacred spaces, which facilitate pluralism and interfaith coexistence in daily religious life and turn tolerance as an idealized, abstract concept into a social reality.

At the same time, the research outlines substantial weaknesses. Sufism cannot be romanticized and considered a natural panacea for extremism. Once Sufi traditions are securitized and instrumentalized by state authorities, their ethics can be undermined, and tensions between one sect and the other can be enhanced. The effectiveness of Sufi thinking as a counter-narrative therefore depends on the ownership of the community, the authenticity of the culture, and the retention of its moral essence.

To sum up, Sufi thinking in Sindh is an important indigenous asset to the peacebuilding and social

harmony. The Sufi past of the Sindh, by preserving and fostering its cultural structures such as poetry, music, shrines, and more inclusive forms of communal life, can not only remain a viable and viable option to extremist and terrorist thought but also play an important role in the future social unification and non-violent co-existence.

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