
Explaining social schizophrenia —Dr Ayesha Siddiq

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In trying to explain my opinion on the social schizophrenia of the Bahawalpuri society, Ejaz Haider has mentioned the increase in the Deobandi influence in the Southern district. He is right. The area has traditionally been a Bareilvi stronghold. But the rise of the Deobandi school has resulted in no small measure to the rise of the jihadi who is also, for the most part, sectarian.

I do not have the expertise to comment on the differences and nuances of the two creeds but, given the feedback on the earlier article, I find it important to explain what seems to have happened to Bahawalpur, once known for its Sufi tradition, its poets and its writers.

Much before the age of 'enlightened moderation', Bahawalpur glowed due to its tradition of tolerance and its rich cultural heritage. A certain level of conservatism notwithstanding the society offered generous space to great men and women of letters. The great Sufi poet Bulleh Shah hailed from Uch Gilaniyan in Bahawalpur from where his family later shifted to Multan and then to a place near Kasur. Bahawalpur being the seat of power of the princely state also contributed to Persian literature. After 1947, the focus shifted to Urdu literature and the district can boast great names such as Khalid Akhter, Zahoor Azar and Jamila Hashmi.

The district has also produced great names in the performing arts (Uzma Gillani and forgotten names such as Tahira Khan who had, during the 1960s earned the title of 'Dukhter-e-Bahawalpur' (daughter of Bahawalpur) and was rated by the connoisseurs of theatre and film as an actress comparable with Elizabeth Taylor).

The Sufi culture gave to Bahawalpuri society a certain tolerance and equanimity. We were not known for passionate reaction or outrage. Resultantly, crimes such as murder or honour killing were largely unheard of. A Bahawalpuri finds it difficult to equate that culture with the trend in the past decade-and-half of Southern Punjab producing extremists.

While Riaz Basra and Masood Azhar are better known, the list is long. Bahawalpur also became known for sectarian tension, a development unheard of even during the 1960s and the 1970s. Today, there are about 15,000 trained jihadis in the Bahawalpur division which comprises the three districts of Bahawalpur, Bahawalnagar and Rahim Yar Khan. It is not clear as to how many of these are still active, particularly after 2003-2004. This is the dateline for some apparent shift in Islamabad's policy towards the militancy after which quite a few militants got absorbed in other professions and settled back in their villages.

Surely, this is no different from other parts of Punjab. But it becomes more surprising in the context of the area's cultural history; plus, Southern Punjab is culturally different from Northern and Central Punjab.

The involvement of Bahawalpur in the business of Jihad is linked to the overall transformation of state policy during the 1980s when General Zia-ul Haq's regime encouraged militancy and a puritanical form of religion in support of its larger military plan to fight a war in Afghanistan and on other fronts, mostly domestic. This period also saw the rise in the number of seminaries in Bahawalpur. In fact, a district government study, kept confidential, conceded the increase in the number of madrassahs and linked them with rise in sectarianism and violence in the district. The report clearly points to the sources of funding for each madrassah and its ideological orientation. The pattern for the report was later copied to study the issue all over the Punjab province.

The issue was not the presence of madrassahs but the deliberate proliferation of these schools and their dominance by puritanical ideologues. Traditionally, religious seminaries were part of the Sufi shrines where the students were not only instructed in religious norms and law but also Persian. Therefore, the older and more traditional madrassahs were also the repositories of precious manuscripts in Arabic and Persian.

Incidentally, Islamabad manipulated the existing madrassah tradition in Bahawalpur to plant and encourage a more puritanical brand of religion. Such deliberate grafting significantly contributed to changing the overall social environment resulting in not only greater Puritanism but also ideological fragmentation.

The proliferation of different sects and religious schools of thought, which are amply represented through their independent mosques and madrassah, denotes the growing social divide. It is almost comical to see the different mosques observing their independent times for azaan (prayer call) based on their interpretation of religion. Incidentally, the religious divide is one of the many divisions. Other fault-lines, however, do not form part of the current discussion.

The state's encouragement of puritanical religion is what I call the exogenous factor. The implicit and explicit support to outfits such as Jaish or the entire jihad industry created a peculiar relationship between the jihadis and the larger society based on the rising power of the latter. A lot of people drifted towards the puritanical agenda to benefit from the windfall of the power and influence of the militants who had greater access to financial and other material resources. These organisations' comfortable access to weapons also attracted young men who wanted to renegotiate their individual position within the larger society.

Therefore, the exogenous factor dovetailed into the endogenous factor or the social impetus to adopt puritanical religious ideology. I relate the endogenous factor to the feudal nature of the socio-political system which is inherently incapable of allowing a renegotiation of power relationships within the society.

It is interesting to watch the movement of capital in Southern Punjab. While the power of the traditional feudal, especially the large landowners, has increased due to their adoption of other means of capital generation and power accumulation, the financial capacity of mid-ranking landowners seems to have changed. The large landowners have gone into industrialisation or joined the bureaucracy to enhance their power. The financial prowess of the mid-ranking landowners (landholding of 50-500 acres) is now challenged due to the emergence of the rural indigenous bourgeoisie or capitalist class who can claim greater financial worth but minimal political power. These belong mostly to the trader-merchant class which has also built land assets to match the traditional landed-feudal. However, the accumulation of land did not change the power-political relationship. Power continues to remain in the hands of the traditional landed-feudal class.

In this social background, the puritanical ideology represented a tool for renegotiating power relationship, especially where the centre of power could not be moved away from families who were the pirs of the area. Considering the public's association with or reverence for the pirs and their families, it was almost impossible for the new capital to grab power unless they could create the capacity to dismantle or challenge the traditional notions of faith and religion.

The new capital or the trader-merchant class in Bahawalpur is involved in funding Deobandi and Wahhabi madrassahs. In fact, even in smaller villages mosques are no longer community affairs but have the patronage of a group or family of trader-merchants. The mosque imam is paid and appointed by the financiers of the mosque and encouraged to propagate a particular brand of Islam which often brings them in direct confrontation with other mosques.

The impact of such a development has multi-layered consequences but the three most significant are: (a) the rift among different religious schools of thought, (b) a shift away from the Sufi tradition to Wahhabism, and (c) a silent confrontation between the old and the new powerhouses represented by the multiple religious ideologies and their related mosques.

Presently, the new capital and their religious partners have not mustered sufficient critical mass to challenge the traditional centres of power which might happen at some future time and date. Meanwhile, the internal tension to shift the centre of power would result in greater friction and fragmentation. That could change the entire character of the Bahawalpuri society.

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