

Creating Counter Narratives to Sectarianism and Hate Speech in Pakistan: An NGO's Efforts to Provide Alternative Avenues of Exchange via Arts and Dialogue.

In the summer of 2013, I conducted research as a McNair Fellow on sectarianism in Pakistan. My research was based on analyzing data of the total number of Shias killed since 1963 till the mid of 2013. Data collected via first responder organizations, web and media sources enabled me to understand the reasons and the factors involved in sectarian violence in various cities throughout Pakistan. Although, I concluded that sectarianism in Pakistan, particularly Shia killing was not merely a sectarian issue, it was rather, a political, economic, theological, global and regional matter; however, my field work also allowed me to witness the methods used to spread sectarianism and hate speech all over Pakistan. One of the preferred methods to incite emotions and violent reactions by extremist on all sides of the isles was graffiti and art on rickshaws. Unfortunately, it was not common to see a rickshaw boasting slogans such as, "Kafir, Kafir, (insert sect) Kafir." These extreme slogans were meant to stir emotions and spread hate amongst people. They were used as a tool to reinforce inter-group divisions and recruit the youth by right-wing religious organizations.

PYA, Pakistan Youth Alliance, a non-governmental organization uses the same platform as a counter technique to hate and extremism in Pakistan. PYA uses the very art form to spread a message of tolerance and peace. This project explores the process by which PYA creates these rickshaws into canvases of artistic "expression, a sharing of ideas, and a medium that enables the artists' "voices" and viewpoints to be conveyed." More importantly, I seek to understand the ways in which these rickshaws play a part in giving the youth an avenue of engagement via dialogue and ideas of social change. The project focuses on the genre of religion and social change, by analyzing the works of PYA and its grass roots activities of creating "counter-values and beliefs that reinforce peace, tolerance, and respect for diversity." PYA employs the "peace rickshaws" to challenge old and promote new ideals about religion and society. Furthermore, what the project intends to understand is the process through which PYA utilizes 50 rickshaws in the city of Lahore as real time street activism through artistic expression of tolerance.

The method employed will be overt engagement with the organization, shadowing the project lead, Syed Ali Abbas Zaidi and his team, volunteers, youth and the rickshaw drivers they impact. The research will be conducted in Lahore over a period of three months. There will be visits to their active project sites in various neighborhoods in Lahore. Moreover, I will be accompanying the team to 10 different schools in Lahore, while the team engages 200 plus students ranging from 12-18 in ages and training them in rickshaw and chamakpatti art. I will witness the students create positive messages as graffiti and art on rickshaws as a way to fight sectarianism.

The significance of the project is to highlight the substantial work PYA is doing in order to counter the standard narrative of terrorism in Pakistan promoted by right wing religious organizations. By doing this research, I hope to learn the process, by which PYA is using something as common as a rickshaw, as an innovative tool for change. I also hope to answer the question, does PYA's peace rickshaws genuinely creating a counter narrative to sectarianism for the youth of Pakistan? More importantly, I hope to challenge the notion of Pakistan being a fanatic state, and hopefully re shape the ideas about religion and social change in the Pakistan of today. This study speaks to the broader theoretical issues of religion in a globalized modern world and the challenges of sectarianism facing the youth of Pakistan.

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