

Sahar Naqvi AIPS Summer Research Grant Narrative Report

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

During the October to December of 2014, I had the pleasure of working with a tremendous Non Profit as an AIPS Fellow in Pakistan. PYA, Pakistan Youth Alliance's effort of fighting extremism via non conventional means is not only worth praising, but also worthy of recognition, due to their remarkable efforts on the ground. PYA has successfully worked in various cities in Pakistan, conducting workshops, organizing soccer tournaments and other interesting projects through which they seek to change ideologies, and old narratives of extremism in Pakistan. The Peace Rickshaw Project was one such venture I had the pleasure of being a part of. After the success of the same project in Karachi, PYA launched the program in other cities in Pakistan as well, in the hopes of challenging old narratives of terrorism and building new understanding of peace, democracy and revising the way people think about religion.

The project entailed me to tag along the team as they engaged various school kids in activities and workshops that focused on re-owning the public space, in this case a rickshaw, the same platform used by various zealous, religious organizations to spread hate speech and extremism in Pakistan. The main task of the group was to employ the same avenue these right-winged organizations had claimed to own, so that a message of tolerance and peace could be spread. In the span of two and a half months, we visited eight different schools, mostly working with children of ages twelve through Eighteen. Every school we went to, the kids were enthusiastic in receiving, understanding and executing the idea. The idea to engage the rickshaw owners, have them come to the schools, while they worked on the art work , employing the technique called, "Chamak Patti," teaching the kids at the same time, and revising the hateful messages on their rickshaws was ingenious, to say the least. The kids were always extremely fascinated in the execution of the art work, eager to get their hands on the rickshaws and to learn the craft from the experts themselves.

While the activity would be going on, the workshop lead would talk to the kids about the kind of messages, they could put up on the rickshaw; so together, the lead, the kids and the rickshaw drivers would come up with a message suitable for the rickshaw. Some of the messages they came up with were as simple as, "Piyar hone de, fasla na rakhe, which translated to "let love prevail, without a hindrance." Another one of my favorite was, " Papu yar tang na kar, mousiqi main jan na kar," referring to a fictional character, "Papu" telling him to stop interruptions while they listen to music. While these slogans may , or may not make sense to us, it surely did make sense to the public it was adhered towards. The messages created by a collaborative effort of the community enabled the ideology of love to penetrate the hearts and the minds of all involved. After the workshops, there would always be a discussion, the lead

would head the discussion and involve the group for half an hour to an hour dialogue , where the group would discuss what they had created, what it truly meant, and how it was challenging the old narrative. For instance, if a rickshaw had a message , "Kafiroon par lanat," or curse on the Kafirs; in this statement, the term Kafir was used for anyone who did not belong to the same ideology as the one sponsoring the message: i.e. right-winged organizations like Jamat-ud-dawa etc. In this instance, the term was a catch all derogatory term for all :sects, faiths and religion, Muslim or Non Muslim; hence, replacing the message with something like "Mohabbat, Aman, Itehad," or Love, Peace and Unity was altering the idea, "hate all others different than you."

In a city like Lahore, which was laden with history, architecture, multiculturalism, a binary existed, which allowed the cultivation, promotion and practice of hate. To battle the ideology of hate, it was the civil society, and non profits that bore the responsibility of retaking public spaces and revising the narrative of hate by employing unique techniques. These avenues allowed young minds to learn, and argue on the bases of religion, and understand that a few hate mongers were not the forbearers of any religion, let alone Islam, that people worked on political agendas that may not be representative of all Muslims. They learned new ways of coexistence, beyond religious, and sectarian boundaries. It is the efforts of such organizations that are changing old narratives one mind at a time. My time in Lahore with various school kids, rickshaw drivers, PYA Staff was the most rewarding because it allowed me to witness how on a grassroots level, a community's perception could be changed by reinforcing ideas of peace and tolerance. Consequently the essence of the workshops, the work PYA was doing lied in the very question the workshop lead asked the audience every time, she or he conducted the workshops, " What did Rehmat-u-lil-alameen meant," the question referred to Prophet Muhammad's titles, Rehmat-u-lil-alameen, or blessing for the whole world. The crux of the message lied the very title.

The significance of this research to Pakistan Studies as a field is that it challenges the perception of Pakistan being the State that sponsors terrorism; it broadens that view that there are alternative voices in Pakistan on a societal level that are concerned with changing religious narrative. It is significant in changing how people think of Pakistan as a Nation, and how right-winged religious organizations, representing Pakistan in the news negatively are not the only representations of this versatile Nation. Moreover, that there is room for dialogue and new ways of understanding theoretical issues of religion. It shows that Civil Society and Non Profits in Pakistan are working towards rethinking the old narrative of religion in society, and working towards socially innovative ideas involving arts , taking back the public space and negotiating old religious values in a modern, globalized world.