Fostering Community Resilience: Harnessing Pashtun Folklore and Local Voices against Violent Extremism

Asghar Khan

August 2023
Abstract

The study highlights the role of folklore in fostering community resilience in Pashtun society against violent extremism. It aims to find the mechanisms through which folklore (traditional narratives, oral traditions, and cultural practices) can contribute to peacebuilding efforts and empower local communities in their fight against terrorism and violent extremism. The study uses qualitative data from both the secondary and primary sources. Secondary data was obtained through content analysis of folklore and scholarly sources while primary data was collected through ethnographic interviews, group discussions, and personal observation. The study finds that Pashtun folklore makes a significant contribution to community resilience in countering violent extremism. Keeping in view the unique role of Pashtun folklore in shaping identity, social cohesion, promoting inclusivity, pluralism, and transmitting core values, policymakers and practitioners can devise effective strategies to leverage this Pashtun indigenous knowledge system for sustainable conflict resolution, and countering violent extremism.

Keywords: Pashtu folklore, Community Resilience, Violent Extremism, Hospitality, Social Cohesion, Pluralism, Inclusivity, Tappa
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Opting for an Integrated Approach to Countering Violent Extremism from Educational Institutions: A case of Southern Punjab

Introduction

Pashtuns living in Pakistan have a rich cultural heritage that is deeply rooted in their folklore\(^1\). Pashtun population that comprises over 35 million people always demonstrated resilience in the face of disasters and calamities. The cultural codes of Pashtun society, i.e. Ashar, Lashkar and Pakhtunwali\(^2\) demonstrate its resilient nature in crisis time. However, terrorism and violent extremism, sponsored by Taliban and Al Qaeda, severely impacted the region especially during the war on terror. It is crucial to understand the complex factors, which contributed to the rise of violent extremism within the Pashtun community. Most of the state-centric literature links the spread of extremism with political and socio-economic grievances of people whereas society-centric works highlight the role of historical and cultural elements.

Though the matter of extremism is consistently comprehended and tackled through state-centric/ security measures (Top-down approach). However, security/military responses are not inclusive and don’t tackle the social and economic causes of extremism. Moving beyond this state-centric/ security perspective, a comprehensive approach to Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE), i.e. community-driven, is the "Whole-of-Society Approach". This approach places a stronger emphasis on community involvement and entails collaborative efforts among government and non-governmental entities, civil society, and the private sector. This collaboration aims to achieve wider inclusivity and to gather valuable local insights. Within this community-driven approach, it is essential to recognize the significance of local voices and cultural expressions, such as folklore. Empowering communities with these cultural tools will enable them to effectively combat the influence of violent extremism.

Community-based approaches prioritize actions such as community engagement, partnerships with civil society organizations, educational endeavours, the involvement of religious and local leaders as well as the preservation of cultural heritage and folklore in the pursuit of countering violent extremism. All of these measures play a significant role in fostering a sense of belonging, challenging extremist views, and addressing moral disengagement within communities to effectively counter the wave of violent extremism (Stephens et al. 2019; Mazerolle et al. 2020; Adnan 2023; Ahmed et al. 2021).

Against this backdrop, by seamlessly integrating these community-centered strategies, including the utilization of folklore, it is evident that harnessing local narratives holds the key to bolstering community resilience and effectively countering violent extremism (Stephens et al. 2019). Acknowledging the profound importance of folklore and its capacity to bolster community resilience, Pashto folklore holds the potential to effectively cultivate community resilience within the

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\(^1\) Folklore refers to a set of beliefs, customs, conventions, and practices of distinct cultural groups, which are preserved by the people belonging to a specific culture.

\(^2\) charity, hospitality, and community services
Pashtun community, countering the influences of violent extremism. Deliberately fashioned, Pashto folklore operates as a proactive tool for deconstructing extremist ideologies. Concurrently, it plays a central role in nurturing favourable attitudes and cultural norms, particularly among the youth. By promoting positive values through folklore and engaging local voices, policymakers can enhance prevention efforts and create more inclusive and resilient societies.

This study aims to build upon the discourse surrounding the significance of Pashtun folklore in bolstering community resilience against the countering violent extremism. By harnessing Pashtun folklore, it accentuates their transformative impact on engaging communities, shaping identities, resolving conflicts, and resolutely countering extremist ideologies. It also seeks to understand how folklore contributes to conflict resolution and the development of community resilience, ultimately strengthening Pashtun society against the pervasive threat of violent extremism. Employing a multidisciplinary approach, the study focuses on the effectiveness of Pashtun folklore for countering violent extremist ideologies. To address the root causes of violent extremism, policymakers are strongly urged to harness the compelling power of Pashtun folklore through contextually grounded interventions. This entails embracing local voices, preserving cultural heritage, and empowering community members to actively counter violent extremism, thereby cultivating resilient societies. In essence, this study unequivocally underscores the significance of Pashtun folklore as an influential instrument for nurturing community resilience to countering violent extremism and promoting positive values within the dynamic Pashtun society.

Methodology

For this study, a qualitative research approach encompassing both primary and secondary sources was adopted. To gather primary data, comprehensive individual ethnographic semi-structured interviews, focused group discussions, and personal observations were conducted. Concurrently, secondary data was procured through a meticulous content analysis of folklore and scholarly sources.

The content analysis was focused on two selected folklore genres: Tappa (Pashto couplets) and Mataluna (Proverbs). This deliberate examination aimed to systematically analyze and interpret the textual components of these genres, unraveling their themes, meanings, and expressions. This effort sought to shed light on their significant contributions to fostering community resilience within Pashtun society, particularly in the context of countering violent extremism.

The primary data collection involved 15 in-depth individual ethnographic semi-structured interviews with a diverse range of participants, including elderly people, religious and literary figures, academics, and Pashto poets. Convenience sampling, appropriate for the volatile Pashtun context, was employed to select the study sample. Furthermore, three focused group discussions were conducted with experts based in Peshawar, Mardan, and Malakand to incorporate their
perspectives on the matter. The content analysis of the selected folklore genre, namely Tappa and Mataluna, contributed valuable insights to the study. Additionally, personal observations played a role in supporting the evidence gathered through multiple research methods.

Literature Review

The CVE programmes sanctioned by the governments have been heavily evaluated by many with a call for more community-driven approaches as these programmes often follow a top-down approach (Odafen 2019). Recognizing the significance of community resilience, a whole-of-society approach is needed (Grossman 2021). This entails partnerships with local communities and a nuanced understanding of resilience within the context of violent extremism, employing theories of public health and disaster recovery. Thus, resilience is crucial to countering extremism (Nielsen and Schack 2016; Grossman et al. 2020), as reflected in various policy frameworks. Defined as the ability to bounce back (Mohaupt 2009), resilience helps societies resist, prevent, adapt, and recover from adversities such as extremism (Grossman 2021). Resilience, as per the social-ecological model, is not merely an individual trait; rather, it constitutes a social process (Hunter 2012) that fosters positive adaptation and transformation at individual, family, community, and societal levels, contributing to the efforts against countering violent extremism.

Resilience is a central concept in CVE. Resilient communities prevent their members from being drawn into extremism by fostering a sense of belonging, challenging extremist views, and addressing the mechanisms of moral disengagement (Stephens et al. 2019). Understanding local community resilience and the key factors involved is crucial (Edwards 2016; Jore 2020). Community-based practices effectively combat extremism (Wimelius et al. 2018). Inclusive networks through multi-faith engagement can counter extremist narratives (Mandaville & Nozell 2017). Genuine partnerships with community members, particularly in Muslim American communities, have proven effective in building resilience (Ellis & Abdi 2017). Educational interventions grounded in moral disengagement theory help individuals challenge the influence of violent extremism (Aly et al. 2014). Involving religious leaders and fostering strong bonds within communities contribute to resilience against violent extremism (Adnan 2023; Ahmed et al. 2021). Cultural heritage, such as folklore assumes a role in Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) by fostering social cohesion, advocating nonviolence, and promoting respect for human rights (Stephens et al., 2019). Furthermore, research is needed to evaluate its effectiveness in CVE efforts and supporting community-led initiatives. Local voices, local resources and cultural practices are vital to resilience, as is collaboration between secular and religious actors. Thus, genuine partnerships, educational interventions, and the involvement of religious leaders, and folklore are all important in creating community resilience to counter violent extremism.

Folklore, as a local initiative plays a significant role by strengthening social cohesion, promoting positive values, serving as an educational tool, and providing inspiration (Stephens et al. 2019;
Mazerolle et al. 2020). Thus, folklore can be an important tool (among others) to strengthen community resilience against violent extremism.

A number of studies and initiatives have emphasized the potential of folklore in building community resilience and countering violent extremism (Weine et al. 2013) Other works examine the causes of violence and countering strategies (Pearson 2020; Ahmed et al. 2021) With regard to Pashtun society, several works explore issues related to radicalization, social institutions, identity, and religious ideologies (Khan 2020; Makki 2022). Furthermore, the significance of folklore in fostering community resilience has been explored by numerous authors. Additionally, these scholars accentuate the positive contribution of Pashtun folklore within Pashtun society.

Building upon the above exploration of community-centered approaches to countering violent extremism, it becomes evident that community-centered strategies, which harness local initiatives and amplify local voices, such as the rich role of folklore, are steadily gaining prominence within the ongoing endeavors to prevent and counter the spread of violent extremism. In this context, it is essential to recognize the pivotal role played by Pashto folklore, which possesses a rich history spanning five millennia. This heritage assumes a vital function in nurturing distinct identities, fostering social capital, preserving traditional knowledge, propagating positive values, and facilitating constructive dialogues. By countering extremist narratives, it contributes to creating a peaceful society (Bukhari 1987; Tahir, 2015). The key themes of Pashtun folklore, such as love, brotherhood, honor, ethical principles aligned with the values such as hospitality, respect for elders, non-violence, and respect for humanity, contributes to richer dialogues. Pashtun folklore, deeply rooted in cultural and religious traditions, spreads knowledge, entertainment, and cultural expressions, while reinforcing the socio-cultural life of the Pashtun community and promoting peace at the grass roots level (Rohi 1986; Tahir, 2015). Pashtun culture and folklore represent the myriad customs, beliefs, and social life of the community and help enhance social cohesion and resist extremist influence.

Findings and Analysis

Pashtun Folklore, Community Resilience and CVE

Noorul Basar (personal communication, 11 April 2023) is of the view that folklore holds immense importance in Pashtun society, as it promotes unity, positive values, social cohesion, inclusivity, pluralism, and transmitting core values thus creating resilience to countering violent extremism; it serves as a vehicle to foster a sense of belonging, providing inspiration, and imparting education. Noor Muhammad, a Pashto language expert said that Pashto folklore, including proverbs and Tappa, reflects the principles, wisdom, and challenges of Pashtun life, addressing social injustices, poverty, and oppression (personal communication, April 11, 2023). Zafar Bakhshali (personal communication, April 11, 2023) said by preserving cultural identity, promoting peace, and voicing
against injustice, folklore strengthens social bonds and contributes to resilience against violent extremism. It encapsulates the authentic image, thoughts, and feelings of Pashtun community.

Pashtun folklore provides moral guidance by conveying ethical principles (aligned with the social values such as hospitality, respect, and non-violence) to counter the ideology of violent extremism. Bushra Khatoon, a Pashto language expert said that proverbs like "Chi Sa Karay, hagha ba Raibay" (You reap what you sow) and "Khairat na koor na shuru kegi" (Charity begins at home) emphasize the importance of personal responsibility and kindness (Personal communication, 20 April 2023). Similarly, during an FGD, a respondent said that “expectations, jealousy, and greed are the factors that disrupt societal harmony.” Pashto proverbs seek to refrain from these social evils:

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<tr>
<td>Duniya ka da yao kas she, ho morr ba pay nashi</td>
<td>Even if someone owns the world, he wouldn't be satisfied with it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pa daira lewani khushalaygi</td>
<td>The mad are happy with more.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wogay khaita marray gi, ho wogay stargay na marray gi</td>
<td>The empty stomach will be filled, but hungry eyes won't be satisfied.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chay da bal dar ta ye tama she, mun ghawakha ye kama she</td>
<td>The person, who expects and looks toward others, loses his weight.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Da tamay kor hali we</td>
<td>Expectations are empty bowls.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chay pa tama da swaro she, hagha pathay pa mairo she</td>
<td>Those, who wait and expect for riders, are always left in deserted routes.</td>
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Shabbir Ahmad (personal communication, 27 April 2023) said: Though the prolonged violent conflict in Pashtun areas has severely impacted Pashtun writers, folklore still promotes a positive cultural identity, celebrating heritage and diversity to counter the narrative of violent extremists. However, Pashto folklore provides insights into the daily life and character of Pashtuns and give them a relief in this tense and anxious world (Tahir 2015). Melmastia, the value of hospitality, is central to Pashtunwali, the way of life for Pashtuns (Jellani 1975). Sher Dil, a Pashto teacher, said that Pashto Tappa like “Khaawanda tola mey threy zar kray! Da yar da kale milmana reghelee deena” (O’ Lord! I would like to serve my heart to the guests who came from the village of my lover) emphasizes the significance of hospitality and its practice by both genders (Personal Communication, April, 27 2023).

Samandar Khan said that Pashtunwali has always embraced religious pluralism and cultural diversity, prohibiting mockery or insult towards others’ beliefs (Personal Communication, April 30, 2023). He says that Tappa like “Yaar may hindo za Musalman yem! Da yaar dapara daramsaal jaro kawoma” (My friend is Hindu while I am Muslim; for my beloved friend, I am cleaning sanctuary) demonstrates religious pluralism, harmony, co-existence and religious tolerance. Whether Hindu or Christian, the Tappa gives the message that we should help anyone in need. In this Tappa, a Muslim helps his Hindu friend clean the temple. Even during the partition of India, Pashtun folklore expressed sorrow over the separation of Hindus and other minority groups, highlighting their
attachment to land and culture. Pashtun areas still accommodate a significant number of Hindus, Sikhs, and other minorities. Barkat Kakar, a Pashto language expert, said: The Tappa “Pa manda kay Hindowan ma zaghalawa! Za pakhtun jowanday yem bach kawom” (Do not shatter the Hindus. Look! I, a Pashtun warrior, am here to defend them.) exemplifies the responsibility of Pashtun people to defend minorities (Personal communication, April 30, 2023).

Aftab Safi, a Pashto teacher, said Pashtun folklore contributes to building community resilience by promoting social cohesion, tolerance, and understanding, countering extremist ideologies (Personal Communication, May 2, 2023). Proverbs like “Zourawar na ya lary ya ghaly” (With the strong/cruel one, either keep your distance or your peace) caution against disturbing peace and harmony. Similarly, another Tappa, “Sok ma waha pa gowatha! Ta ba na woli pa gatta” (Do not beat someone with your finger, so he will not stone you) call for peace. These Pashto Tappas and proverbs advise against violent acts.

Pashtun folklore not only reinforces cultural identity and a sense of belonging among people, but also acts as a protective factor against extremist ideologies. Ahmad Ali, a Pashto teacher, said: folklore narratives, songs, and dances transmit cultural values, traditions, and norms, creating a shared identity (Personal Communication, May 11, 2023). Proverbs like “Khpal biya hum khpal we” (Blood is thicker than water) and “Chay zdaa kray pakhwanai, Hayr ba na kray tar pyrai” (That which is learned in youth is not forgotten in old age) highlight the significance of cultural identity and values. Liaqat, a Pashto teacher, said references to asal nasal (ethnic origin) in Pashto folklore further reinforce cultural identity (Personal communication 11 May 2023).

Moreover, the transmission of core values is a vital aspect of Pashtun folklore, which shapes the behavior of individuals and social groups. Bushra Khatoon said: Pashtunwali, a code of honor, encompasses values like honor, bravery, respect for elders, and hospitality, passed down through generations (Personal Communication, May 22, 2023). Noor Muhammad, a Pashto language expert, said folklore narratives serve as moral lessons, promoting values such as peace, tolerance, unity, and respect for diversity, countering extremist ideologies (Personal Communication, May 22, 2023). The proverb, “Pukhtun chay pukhto na krri, nu zamaka day pay daka she” (A Pashtun who does not follow his code of life, should be buried in grave); and “Pa khowala hoog, pa zrra koog” (A soft spoken man always has a craggy/bumpy heart) reflect core values, emphasizing honor, faithfulness, and the rejection of deceit and jealousy. Zafar Bakhshali said these proverbs exemplify the character of a true Pashtun, who possesses integrity and goodwill towards others (Personal Communication May 22, 2023).

Pashtun folklore contains much for conflict resolution, offering valuable lessons in resolving conflicts peacefully. Folklore serves as a reservoir of wisdom that can be drawn upon to address social tensions and prevent them from escalating into violence. Ahmed Ali said proverbs such as “Ka ghar loway day, pa sar ye laar da” (Though the mountain is high, there still be a road to its
top) emphasize finding nonviolent solutions to challenges (Personal Communication, May 29, 2023). Additionally, the role of folklore in conflict resolution is highlighted by the use of proverbs in specific situations. Bushra Khatoon (personal communication 29 May 2023) says proverbs emphasize dialogue, peaceful resolution, and the futility of violence. She added, proverbs like “Wena pa wena na wenzal kegi” (Blood cannot be cleaned by blood) emphasize the importance of peaceful dispute resolution. She added that there are many other proverbs and Tappas that address the need for humility, the role of village elders, the consequences of arrogance, the resolution of unpaid debts, lessons in conflict resolution, peaceful dialogue, and the importance of relationships in resolving conflicts. Anwar Nigar, a Pashto language expert, said: “The use of proverbs in specific situations illustrates the wisdom embedded in Pashtun folklore for resolving social tensions and preventing violence,” (Personal Communication, 30 May 2023).

During a group discussion, participants highlighted the role of bed-time stories in nurturing peaceful coexistence, promoting pluralism, and enabling a suspension of disbelief that allows for the exploration of magical worlds embodying humanism, piety, and selfless sacrifice.

Pashtun folklore strengthens social bonds and promotes unity through storytelling, music, and communal celebrations. A participant said: “Proverbs like “Pukhtana wanrra sara yao di!” (All the Pashtuns are united) emphasize unity and national pride. They said folklore empowers local voices, allowing individuals to express their concerns and ideas to counter extremist views. Proverbs such as “Raas osa, pa loya laar k mlast osa” (Live a good life, and thus need not to fear while sleeping on road) discourage social evils.

Pashtun folklore promotes the transmission of core values, fostering peace, tolerance, and respect for diversity. Proverbs like “Hapal amal da laray mal day” (The actions of a man are his companions) highlight the importance of personal responsibility. It engages youth by incorporating folklore into educational programmes and encouraging their participation in socio-cultural activities. An FGD participant said: “The role of folklore in engaging youths is evident in the use of music, poetry, and traditional dances to promote peace and counter extremism.”

To sum up, Pashtun folklore fosters community resilience, promotes peace, and engages local voices to counter extremism. Through storytelling and cultural rituals, it communicates values of tolerance and resilience as an alternative to extremist ideologies. Initiatives harnessing Pashtun folklore are crucial in combating violent extremism within the community.

**Policy Recommendations**

It is crucial to document and conduct more research on Pashtun folklore to make it part of school and university curricula to enlighten the future generations. The ministry should develop and implement educational programmes that incorporate Pashtun folklore as a means to promote
cultural identity, moral values, and resilience among the youth. Collaboration among community leaders, cultural practitioners, and policymakers is essential for designing and implementing context-specific interventions that utilize the potential of Pashtun folklore. There is a need to incorporate Pashtun folklore in CVE programmes through awareness-raising campaigns, radio programmes, and educational materials.

Policymakers should support community-led CVE initiatives that build on local knowledge and traditions as well as promote social cohesion and trust-building among different groups within the Pashtun community. The government needs to launch community-led education initiatives that promote critical thinking, religious tolerance, and non-violent conflict resolution. For this purpose, communities may be trained on conflict resolution and mediation skills. Women and youths should be given equal representations in such programmes. There is a need to support and promote cultural festivals based on Pashtun folklore in educational institutions, communities and union council level. Such initiatives can be effective in countering extremist narratives by highlighting the positive aspects of Pashtun cultural heritage. Pashtun folklore research centers need to set up at district and Tehsil level under local governments that may provide grants to researchers and folklorists, and creating platforms for sharing folklore resources.

**Conclusion**

The study highlights the significant role of Pashtun folklore, local voices, and community resilience in countering violent extremism. Pashtun folklore serves as a powerful tool to enhance community resilience by fortifying social bonds, promoting local voices, transferring essential values, and engaging the youth. Through storytelling, oral traditions, and cultural rituals, Pashtun folklore communicates values of peace, tolerance, and resilience, offering an alternative narrative to extremist ideologies. It also facilitates community engagement, fosters dialogue, and stimulates collective action.

To effectively combat violent extremism, the study emphasizes to build community resilience, which is shaped by factors such as robust social networks, access to education and economic opportunities, effective governance, and a sense of collective responsibility. Initiatives that harness Pashtun folklore and promote community resilience are essential components of any strategy aimed at addressing extremism within the Pashtun community.

By leveraging the transformative power of Pashtun folklore and prioritizing community resilience, the government can effectively counter violent extremism, preserve cultural identity, and foster peace within the Pashtun community.
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