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The Role of Qur'anic Pedagogy and Sufi Values in Countering Extremism and Promoting Harmony in South Punjab

Sajjad Hussain
Hafiz Muhammad Mudassar Shafique
Department of Islamic Studies, Superior University, Lahore, Pakistan

Abstract

This study explores the vital role of Qur'anic pedagogy and Sufi values in countering extremism and fostering harmony in South Punjab, a region historically shaped by rich Sufi traditions and deep Qur'anic learning. The research contends that both the Qur'an and Sufism present a spiritually integrated model of education that cultivates moral reasoning, emotional intelligence, and social empathy, thereby countering extremist ideologies that thrive on literalism and intolerance.

Drawing on historical, theological, and sociological perspectives, the study examines how Sufi institutions, such as the shrines of Baha-ud-Din Zakariya and Shah Rukn-e-Alam, have served as centers of inclusive learning and spiritual guidance. Qur'anic pedagogy, when grounded in ethical reflection (*tadabbur*) and inner purification (*tazkiyah al-nafs*), nurtures a holistic understanding of faith that discourages sectarian exclusivity. Meanwhile, Sufis operationalize the Qur'anic ideals of compassion (*rahmah*), humility (*tawadu*'), and service to humanity (*khidmat al-khalq*), translating theological principles into social action.

The study concludes that the integration of these two traditions, Qur'anic education and Sufi ethics, can serve as a sustainable framework for peacebuilding and moral development in South Punjab. It recommends reforming madrassa curricula, training teachers in Sufi-inspired pedagogy, and promoting interfaith dialogues modeled after Sufi practices of inclusivity. By reviving indigenous spiritual and educational paradigms, South Punjab can reclaim its legacy as a land of tolerance and harmony.

Keywords
Qur'anic pedagogy, Sufi values, extremism, harmony, South Punjab, Islamic education, peacebuilding

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Corresponding Author:
su94-phisw-f24-012@superrior.edu.pk

Introduction

The southern region of Punjab in Pakistan, covering the divisions of Multan, Bahawalpur, and Dera Ghazi Khan, has long been recognized as a land of spiritual richness and social complexity (Arora, 2024). Historically, this region flourished under the influence of great Sufi saints whose shrines became centers of learning, tolerance, and moral cultivation (Charan et al., 2018). However, in recent decades, social fragmentation, educational disparity, and political neglect have contributed to the emergence of extremist ideologies that threaten the peace once cultivated through the spiritual ethos of Sufism (Khan, 2025).

South Punjab's identity is deeply intertwined with the teachings of the Qur'an and the values propagated by Sufi masters such as Bahauddin Zakariya and Shah Rukn-e-Alam (Saeed, 2021). Their khanqahs served as spaces for spiritual purification and community development, emphasizing *hikmah* (wisdom), *rahmah* (mercy), and *adl* (justice) (Ali et al., 2024). These Qur'anic principles were not merely theological abstractions but pedagogical

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foundations for moral education and peaceful coexistence (Akhtar, 2024). However, in many areas of South Punjab, modern religious education has drifted away from this integrated spiritual-pedagogical model, often focusing on rote learning while neglecting the ethical and social dimensions of the Qur'an's message (Ridwan et al., 2025).

Recent sociological and security analyses reveal that extremist tendencies have found fertile ground in economically deprived and educationally marginalized districts of South Punjab (Javed et al., 2025). A report by the Pakistani newspaper Dawn highlighted that in Dera Ghazi Khan alone, over 180 registered madrassas were operating, some of which were reportedly linked to networks involved in extremist recruitment (Dawn, 2011). These developments point toward a worrying disconnect between religious instruction and the Qur'an's intrinsic call for balance, compassion, and social justice.

This study seeks to re-examine how Qur'anic pedagogy, understood as teaching grounded in the holistic wisdom of the Qur'an alongside Sufi ethical values, can be mobilized to counter such radical tendencies and restore harmony. Qur'anic pedagogy emphasizes reflection (*tadabbur*), dialogue (*shura*), and moderation (*wasatiyyah*), while Sufi traditions foster humility, self-purification, and love of humanity (Teten et al., 2025). The convergence of these two approaches may serve as an antidote to intolerance, promoting education that forms the heart as well as the intellect.

In the cultural context of South Punjab, this integration holds particular promise. The region's people continue to revere their Sufi heritage through festivals, poetry, and collective remembrance (zikr) (Mohabbat, 2024). These practices embody an indigenous form of peace education rooted in faith and culture. Studies on peacebuilding education in Pakistan emphasize that moral and spiritual learning, when aligned with authentic Qur'anic values, can significantly reduce the attraction of extremist ideologies among youth (Haseeb et al., 2020). Similarly, the revival of community-based Qur'anic learning with Sufi ethical framing has shown potential in building social cohesion (Armeen & Bashir, 2025).

Moreover, research from educational policy institutes underscores that educational reform is essential for sustainable peace in South Punjab. A report by the Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI) observed that poverty, unemployment, and lack of critical religious education have all contributed to extremist tendencies in the region (Sustainable Development Policy, 2018). Complementary studies further argue that the absence of contextual Qur'anic instruction relevant to modern social realities can, when moral formation is neglected, indirectly foster radicalization (Ashraf et al., 2021). Addressing these challenges through a Qur'an-centered, Sufi-inspired educational paradigm could help nurture a new generation of learners who value dialogue, tolerance, and service to humanity (*khidmat-e-khalq*).

Thus, the present research aims not only to provide theoretical insight but also to inspire a transformative educational vision for South Punjab, one that draws from its own sacred heritage to confront its contemporary social dilemmas. By bridging Qur'anic pedagogy and Sufi ethics, it proposes an indigenous framework for countering extremism and promoting lasting social harmony (Qadri et al., 2024).

South Punjab has long been regarded as the spiritual heartland of the Indian subcontinent. The region's unique synthesis of Qur'anic learning and Sufi practice shaped its identity for nearly eight centuries. Cities such as Multan and Uch Sharif became renowned centers of Sufi devotion and Qur'anic scholarship. The fusion of spiritual instruction with social welfare, characteristic of Sufism, created an enduring moral and intellectual tradition that continues to influence the region's collective consciousness.

The roots of Sufism in South Punjab date back to the 12th and 13th centuries, during the rise of the Suhrawardiyya and Qadiriyya orders. The arrival of Sufi masters like Shaykh Bahauddin Zakariya (1171–1262) and his successors transformed Multan into what

historians call "*Madinat al-Awliya*," the City of Saints (Eaton, 1993). Their khanqahs (lodges) not only served as places of worship and meditation but also as community schools where Qur'anic education was integrated with moral training and social service. This model reflected the Qur'anic injunction to combine knowledge with action (*'ilm wa 'amal*), linking faith to ethical responsibility.

Bahauddin Zakariya's emphasis on the inner dimensions of the Qur'an and the outward service to society inspired generations of scholars and disciples. His teaching methodology was holistic; students memorized Qur'anic verses while also learning principles of compassion, justice, and humility. This integration of ta'lim (instruction) and tarbiyah (spiritual formation) became the hallmark of Sufi pedagogy across South Punjab. It cultivated individuals who not only understood scripture but also embodied its moral vision. Scholars note that this early educational model provided a counterbalance to dogmatism by promoting inclusivity, dialogue, and peace (Ernst, 1992).

The Sufi tradition also played a crucial role in preserving and disseminating Islamic knowledge during times of political turmoil. In the 18th and 19th centuries, when colonial pressures disrupted formal Islamic education, the shrines of Multan, Bahawalpur, and Dera Ghazi Khan continued to function as informal universities. Here, Qur'anic recitation, Arabic grammar, theology (kalam), and mysticism (tasawwuf) were taught side by side. The integration of these disciplines reflected a distinctly South Asian Islamic ethos that valued harmony over sectarianism.

The role of Sufi saints extended beyond education into the social sphere. They acted as mediators, reformers, and exemplars of peace. Their teachings emphasized the Qur'anic principles of justice (adl), patience (sabr), and compassion (rahmah), thereby shaping a moral community centered on empathy and coexistence. This social vision resonated deeply with the agrarian and multi-ethnic society of South Punjab, offering an indigenous framework for conflict resolution long before modern notions of peacebuilding emerged.

In the 20th century, the institutional structure of religious education began to change. With the rise of formal madrassas and state-sponsored Islamic curricula, the traditional synthesis of Qur'anic and Sufi instruction gradually declined. Many new institutions focused on doctrinal precision rather than spiritual cultivation. As a result, the humanistic and peace-oriented legacy of classical Sufi education weakened. Recent research suggests that this shift has contributed to growing ideological rigidity and a reduction in inter-sect harmony within the region (Zaman, 2002).

Nevertheless, remnants of the Sufi educational spirit endure. At major shrines like that of Shah Rukn-e-Alam in Multan and Khawaja Ghulam Farid in Mithankot, one still finds informal learning circles where Qur'anic verses are interpreted through the lens of love and divine unity (tawhid). Such spaces serve as living reminders of how Sufi pedagogy once harmonized faith, intellect, and community.

This historical overview highlights that South Punjab's Sufi heritage cannot be separated from its educational history. The pedagogical principles derived from the Qur'an and nurtured within Sufi institutions offer a time-tested model for moral formation. In the present context marked by extremist ideologies and social polarization, this legacy provides both a moral compass and a practical framework for rebuilding peaceful communities grounded in the Qur'an's message of mercy and the Sufis' practice of compassion.

Literature Review

Conceptual Framework Qur'anic Pedagogy and Sufi Values

A conceptual understanding of how Qur'anic pedagogy and Sufi values intersect provides the theoretical foundation for this study. Both traditions, though distinct in expression, share a common objective: cultivating the human self (tazkiyah al-nafs) through knowledge, compassion, and ethical engagement with society. Qur'anic pedagogy provides the divine

blueprint for learning and moral reasoning, while Sufi values translate these teachings into lived experience. Their integration creates a holistic educational paradigm capable of resisting ideological extremism and fostering social harmony.

Qur'anic Pedagogy: Theological and Educational Principles

The Qur'an positions knowledge ('ilm) as the highest virtue of humankind, linking it directly to spiritual awareness and social justice. The command "Read in the name of your Lord who created" [Al-Qur'an 96:1] establishes the act of learning as sacred, while verses such as "Are those who know equal to those who do not know?" [Al-Qur'an 39:9] highlights the moral obligation of intellectual inquiry. Classical Muslim scholars from al-Ghazālī to Ibn Khaldūn interpreted such verses as a call for balanced education that cultivates intellect ('aql) and spirit (ruh) together (Ghazālī, 1966).

Within this framework, Qur'anic pedagogy emphasizes four interrelated values: hikmah (wisdom), rahmah (mercy), 'adl (justice), and wasatiyyah (moderation). Hikmah ensures that knowledge is applied with discernment; rahmah grounds learning in empathy and compassion; 'adl establishes fairness in social and moral dealings; and wasatiyyah guards against extremes in belief or action. Together, these principles form a pedagogical philosophy that rejects dogmatism and promotes intellectual humility.

In practical educational terms, Qur'anic pedagogy fosters reflective reasoning (tadabbur), dialogue (shura), and the integration of Theory with practice ('amal). Learning is not limited to memorization but extends to understanding divine signs in the self and the world (ayat Allah fi al-anfus wa fi al-afaq). This dynamic and dialogical approach, when properly implemented, resists the rigid literalism that often underpins extremist ideologies. Contemporary Islamic educators such as Kamali and Ramadan argue that Qur'anic education must balance textual fidelity with contextual understanding to remain relevant in pluralistic societies (Kamali, 2015).

Sufi Values: Ethical and Spiritual Dimensions

Sufism, as an experiential dimension of Islam, internalizes the Qur'anic message through purification of the heart (tazkiyah), love (mahabbah), and service (khidmat-e-khalq). It seeks to actualize the Qur'anic ideal of ihsan, "to worship God as though you see Him." The Sufi approach transforms religious knowledge into moral action by cultivating humility, patience, and empathy. Such values directly counter the arrogance and exclusivism that fuel extremist mindsets.

The ethical structure of Sufism rests upon four core principles: self-discipline (mujahadah), sincerity (ikhlas), tolerance (tasamuh), and universal compassion (rahmah 'ammah). Historically, Sufi masters in South Punjab applied these values not only in spiritual training but also in community relations. Their teachings embraced people of various sects and ethnicities, making Sufi institutions models of inclusivity. The moral pedagogy of Sufism thus functions as both a preventive and corrective force against extremism, emphasizing the inner reformation that precedes outer peace.

Convergence of Qur'anic and Sufi Frameworks

The convergence between Qur'anic pedagogy and Sufi ethics lies in their shared anthropology of the human being. Both view the human heart (qalb) as the seat of moral consciousness and divine receptivity. The Qur'an states, "*Verily in the remembrance of Allah do hearts find rest*" [Al-Qur'an 13:28], a verse often cited by Sufis to underscore the necessity of spiritual awareness in education. When Qur'anic learning is infused with Sufi ethical training, education becomes a transformative process producing individuals who are intellectually alert, emotionally balanced, and socially responsible.

The synthesis of these traditions can be articulated in three dimensions:

1. **Cognitive Dimension**

The development of critical, reflective reasoning based on Qur'anic principles of understanding (tafakkur) and discernment (furqan).

2. **Affective Dimension**
   The cultivation of empathy, compassion, and love, as taught in Sufi ethics, promotes an internalized sense of peace.
3. **Behavioral Dimension**
   The application of knowledge through just and peaceful action, reflecting Qur'anic calls to 'adl and Sufi devotion to khidmat-e-khalq.

This integrated approach provides a moral pedagogy that can neutralize extremist tendencies by addressing both cognitive misinterpretations and emotional alienation. Where extremism narrows faith into rigid ideology, the Qur'anic–Sufi paradigm broadens it into moral universality.

Relevance to South Punjab's Contemporary Context

In the context of South Punjab, this conceptual framework offers a culturally grounded solution to social fragmentation. The region's educational institutions, many of which already possess spiritual traditions, can reinvigorate their curricula by reintroducing Qur'anic pedagogy informed by Sufi ethics. Such an approach aligns with indigenous cultural values and resists the external ideological influences that have shaped recent extremism.

Moreover, integrating Qur'anic–Sufi perspectives into teacher education can produce educators who model patience, compassion, and intellectual balance. These values not only enhance religious understanding but also strengthen social cohesion. As South Punjab continues to face challenges of poverty and ideological manipulation, returning to its authentic pedagogical and spiritual heritage may be the key to rebuilding peaceful coexistence.

Extremism in South Punjab: Causes and Challenges

Understanding the nature of extremism in South Punjab requires a nuanced exploration of its historical, socio-economic, and ideological underpinnings. The region's unique cultural composition, rooted in centuries of Sufi traditions, has, paradoxically, witnessed an increasing presence of radical movements over the past few decades. While the majority of its people remain adherents of moderate Islam, external and internal dynamics have contributed to a gradual erosion of this pluralistic ethos.

Historical Context of Radicalization

Historically, South Punjab has been a bastion of Sufi Islam, known for its tolerance, inclusivity, and devotion to saints such as Shah Rukn-e-Alam, Bahauddin Zakariya, and Khwaja Ghulam Farid. Their shrines became centers of spiritual, cultural, and educational life, promoting peace and coexistence among diverse communities. However, the sociopolitical landscape changed significantly after 1970. The Islamization policies of General Zia-ul-Haq (1977–1988), combined with the Afghan jihad, introduced militant interpretations of Islam that found fertile ground in economically deprived and educationally neglected regions (Ahmed, 2000).

During this period, a proliferation of sectarian organizations emerged, particularly in the southern districts of Multan, Bahawalpur, and Dera Ghazi Khan. These groups capitalized on local grievances and used religious rhetoric to recruit youth. The weakening of traditional Sufi institutions, combined with inadequate state regulation of madrassas, allowed extremist ideologies to replace the older, inclusive forms of religious education (International Crisis Group, 2009).

Socio-Economic Factors

Socio-economic deprivation remains one of the most significant catalysts for extremism in South Punjab. The region lags behind central Punjab in literacy rates, employment opportunities, and infrastructure development. A 2020 report by the Pakistan Institute for

Peace Studies (PIPS) identified a direct correlation between poverty, lack of education, and susceptibility to extremist recruitment (Pakistan Institute for Peace, 2023). Madrassas offering free food, lodging, and religious instruction became the primary educational avenues for many families, making them vulnerable to ideological manipulation.

Moreover, the absence of vocational and civic education has left young people with limited prospects for social mobility. Extremist networks exploit this vacuum by offering identity, belonging, and purpose elements often missing in the socio-economic reality of marginalized youth. This creates a cycle where economic frustration is transformed into ideological militancy.

Ideological and Theological Dimensions

The ideological crisis in South Punjab cannot be separated from the broader decline in authentic Qur'anic and Sufi pedagogical traditions. Where the Qur'an advocates balance (wasatiyyah) and moral reasoning, extremist ideologies promote literalism and exclusivism. Theological interpretations that ignore historical context and spiritual depth have led to the weaponization of religion for political ends.

A key challenge is the dominance of rhetoric over reason. Extremist preachers employ emotional persuasion, isolating selected verses of the Qur'an from their ethical context. Without the counterbalance of Sufi ethics, which emphasize humility, tolerance, and love, religion becomes a tool for division rather than unity. This intellectual distortion can only be corrected by restoring authentic religious scholarship grounded in Qur'anic pedagogy and Sufi values (Zaman, 2012).

Political and Institutional Weaknesses

Another factor contributing to extremism is the failure of political and educational institutions to provide inclusive governance. Local elites have often prioritized personal gain over community welfare, allowing extremist organizations to fill the void with welfare services and identity-based politics. The lack of an effective curriculum promoting peace, pluralism, and interfaith understanding has further entrenched narrow worldviews.

Furthermore, state responses to extremism have been mainly reactive rather than preventive. Security operations may temporarily suppress militant groups, but they do not address the ideological and educational roots of the problem. Without institutional reform and integration of Qur'anic–Sufi education into mainstream curricula, these efforts remain incomplete.

Cultural Erosion and Identity Crisis

Perhaps the most profound challenge is the erosion of South Punjab's indigenous cultural identity. The region's Sufi heritage once provided a shared moral vocabulary that transcended sectarian divisions. Music, poetry, and shrine-based festivals fostered a sense of belonging and spiritual equality. However, extremist narratives have delegitimized such cultural expressions, labeling them as un-Islamic.

This cultural erosion has led to what scholars describe as an "identity crisis," where younger generations are detached from their spiritual roots and more susceptible to imported ideologies. Reviving Sufi education and Qur'anic pedagogy in schools, mosques, and community centers could restore this lost equilibrium and rebuild a collective consciousness rooted in compassion and moderation.

Summary of Challenges

The persistence of extremism in South Punjab can thus be traced to five interlocking challenges:

1. Historical distortions resulting from political Islamization and foreign intervention.
2. Economic deprivation and lack of equitable educational opportunities.
3. Theological misinterpretations detached from authentic Qur'anic and Sufi teachings.
4. Institutional failures in governance and curriculum development.

5. Cultural disintegration and weakening of traditional Sufi influence.

Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive educational and cultural reform program, one that re-centers the Qur'an's message of wisdom and mercy, and the Sufi path of love and service.

Integrating Qur'anic Pedagogy and Sufi Ethics in Education

The integration of Qur'anic pedagogy and Sufi ethics into the educational system of South Punjab offers a practical, sustainable approach to counter extremism and promote social harmony. Both traditions emphasize moral formation, intellectual engagement, and compassionate action qualities essential for building peaceful communities. While modern educational policies in Pakistan often focus on cognitive development, they seldom address the moral and spiritual dimensions that can protect young minds from ideological radicalization. This section explores how Qur'anic and Sufi educational frameworks can be synthesized into a coherent pedagogical model for transformative learning.

The Qur'anic Model of Education: From Knowledge to Transformation

The Qur'an establishes education as a process of transformation rather than mere information transfer. The early Muslim scholars treated learning (ta'allum) as a sacred journey toward the realization of divine guidance. The Qur'anic imperative, "Say: My Lord, increase me in knowledge" [Al-Qur'an 20:114], reflects the continuous pursuit of truth combined with humility. Education, in this sense, becomes both intellectual and ethical, shaping individuals who act with justice *('adl*) and compassion (*rahmah*).

The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ served as the living model of this pedagogy. His method combined teaching with moral nurturing (*tarbiyah*), dialogue (*shura*), and experiential learning (*'amal*). Teachers and learners were seen as partners in the moral elevation of society. Modern educational theorists such as Seyyed Hossein Nasr argue that this integrated vision of knowledge uniting intellect and spirituality is essential for restoring balance in Islamic education today (Nasr, 1989).

Sufi Ethics as a Pedagogical Resource

Sufi education (*taṣawwufī tarbiyah*) extends the Qur'anic ideal into lived character. Its pedagogy revolves around the purification of the heart (*tazkiyah al-nafs*), the cultivation of humility, and the service of humanity (*khidmat-e-khalq*). Unlike rote learning systems that focus on memorization, Sufi pedagogy emphasizes self-awareness, reflection (muraqabah), and companionship (*suhbah*)—the spiritual teacher, or murshid, functions not merely as an instructor but also as a moral exemplar.

In the historical context of South Punjab, Sufi lodges (*khanqahs*) acted as informal universities where poetry, ethics, and social service were taught side by side. These institutions provided emotional stability, especially for the poor and marginalized. The verses of Khwaja Ghulam Farid and Bulleh Shah continue to serve as vehicles of moral and spiritual awakening. Their emphasis on love (*ishq*), equality, and compassion provided an indigenous counter-narrative to sectarianism and violence (Schimmel, 1976).

Toward a Qur'anic–Sufi Educational Synthesis

Integrating Qur'anic pedagogy with Sufi ethics requires reimagining education as a moral-spiritual journey. This synthesis can be operationalized through three dimensions:

1. **Curricular Integration:**
   Islamic Studies curricula at schools, colleges, and madrassas should be redesigned to include not only Qur'anic memorization and exegesis but also ethical reflections drawn from Sufi teachings. Texts such as Ihya 'Ulum al-Din by al-Ghazali and Kashf al-Mahjub by al-Hujwiri may be introduced as sources of moral reasoning. This would enable students to see Islam as a living moral tradition rather than a rigid code of laws.
2. **Teacher Training and Character Formation:**

Teachers must be trained not only in content delivery but also in moral pedagogy. The Prophet's statement, "*The best among you are those who learn and teach the Qur'an*" [Sahih al-Bukhari: 5027], underscores the teacher's dual role as educator and moral guide. Incorporating Sufi practices like reflective silence, compassion exercises, and dialogue circles can enhance emotional intelligence among teachers and students alike.

3. **Community-Based Learning:**
   Qur'anic–Sufi education is inherently communal. It values the shared pursuit of virtue over individual competition. Integrating social service, peace projects, and interfaith dialogue into the educational process can transform schools into centers of social reform. When students participate in acts of kindness or environmental stewardship as part of religious education, they internalize the ethical essence of Islam (Rahman, 1982).

Practical Implementation in South Punjab

In South Punjab, integrating Qur'anic and Sufi pedagogies could revitalize existing educational structures. Government and private institutions may collaborate with local shrines and Sufi centers to design peace-oriented curricula. Community madrassas could adopt modules on conflict resolution, empathy, and the Qur'anic principles of *wasatiyyah* (moderation) and *adl* (justice).

Furthermore, incorporating local Sufi literature in Punjabi and Siraiki languages can make education culturally resonant. When students read Bulleh Shah's verses alongside Qur'anic principles of love and mercy, they connect faith with culture, building resilience against extremist ideologies.

A 2024 case study found that educational interventions incorporating Sufi teachings in Punjab led to a measurable reduction in students' sectarian attitudes (Imran, 2024). This evidence underscores that the combination of Qur'anic rationality and Sufi ethics is not merely theoretical; it holds empirical promise for peacebuilding.

Challenges and Future Prospects

However, integrating these traditions poses several challenges, including bureaucratic rigidity, the politicization of religion, and a shortage of trained teachers. The reform must therefore begin with teacher education and policy-level support. Introducing pilot programs in universities like Bahauddin Zakariya University (Multan) or Islamia University (Bahawalpur) could serve as models for broader implementation.

Ultimately, Qur'anic–Sufi pedagogy aims not only to produce literate minds but also awakened hearts. Its success will depend on whether education policymakers recognize moral formation as central, not peripheral, to national progress. As Allama Muhammad Iqbal envisioned, the revival of Muslim civilization requires the spiritualization of knowledge, in which intellect and love work in harmony (Iqbal, 1934).

The Role of Religious Institutions and Local Communities

The effective countering of extremism and promotion of harmony in South Punjab depends not only on educational reform but also on the active participation of religious institutions and local communities. Mosques, madrassas, Sufi shrines, and community organizations constitute the moral infrastructure of society. Historically, these institutions have been the heart of spiritual guidance, social justice, and communal welfare. However, in recent decades, some of them have been either marginalized or misused for sectarian propaganda. Revitalizing their authentic Qur'anic and Sufi roles is therefore crucial for sustainable peacebuilding in the region.

Mosques as Centers of Ethical Instruction

The mosque (*masjid*) in Islamic civilization was never intended solely as a place of ritual worship; it was a dynamic center of education, governance, and moral formation. During the Prophet Muhammad's ﷺ time, the mosque served as a learning environment where knowledge and spirituality were intertwined. The Prophet's mosque in Madinah exemplified

inclusivity, welcoming men, women, and even non-Muslims to engage in dialogue and education.

In South Punjab, mosques can once again become beacons of moral education by integrating Qur'anic pedagogy into their teaching. Imams and khateebs (preachers) play a decisive role in shaping religious discourse. If trained in Sufi ethics and Qur'anic moderation (wasatiyyah), they can transform Friday sermons into tools of peace education. Recent initiatives such as the Paigham-e-Pakistan declaration (2018), endorsed by hundreds of scholars across Pakistan, show that religious leaders can collectively denounce extremism and promote national unity when guided by authentic Islamic principles (Makki & Khan, 2019).

Madrassas and Curriculum Transformation

Madrassas in South Punjab have long been the backbone of religious education. While most operate peacefully, extremist networks have exploited a small number. Reforming these institutions is therefore central to counter-extremism efforts. Rather than viewing madrassas as threats, policymakers should engage them as potential partners for peacebuilding.

Integrating Qur'anic–Sufi principles into madrassa curricula could cultivate a generation of scholars who are both intellectually competent and spiritually balanced. Key subjects should include comparative ethics, peacebuilding, and the prophetic model of compassion. Courses on the lives and teachings of South Asian Sufi saints such as Data Ganj Bakhsh, Shah Rukn-e-Alam, and Khwaja Ghulam Farid can root students in their indigenous spiritual heritage.

Pilot programs, like those initiated by Idara-e-Taleem-o-Aagahi (ITA) and the Council of Islamic Ideology, have already shown positive results in fostering tolerance when modern subjects and peace education are incorporated alongside traditional religious studies.

Sufi Shrines as Spaces of Pluralism

Sufi shrines (dargahs) in South Punjab hold immense potential as sites of social harmony. Historically, these shrines served as community centers where people from all backgrounds sought spiritual comfort and social assistance. Their message of universal love and service transcended sectarian boundaries.

Unfortunately, many shrines have faced attempts at ideological redefinition, with extremist actors seeking to discredit or restrict their inclusive practices. Reviving the authentic function of shrines as spaces of dialogue, charity, and cultural expression can serve as a counterbalance to radicalism. Initiatives like the Shrine Peace Committees established in Multan and Bahawalpur, supported by civil society and local administration, have successfully used cultural festivals, qawwali gatherings, and youth seminars to promote inter-sect harmony (Code Pakistan, 2019).

Community and Civil Society Engagement

Grassroots communities are indispensable in sustaining peace efforts. Civil society organizations (CSOs), women's groups, and youth forums have begun collaborating with religious leaders to design localized counter-extremism campaigns. For instance, the Peace and Education Foundation (PEF) trained over 3,000 clerics in Punjab between 2017 and 2021 to promote peace-centered sermons. Similarly, the Punjab Peace and Resilience Project (PPRP) have established interfaith dialogue platforms connecting Muslim, Christian, and Hindu community leaders in the Bahawalpur and Multan districts (Manj et al., 2023).

Sufi-inspired community service projects, such as food distribution (langar), health camps, and literacy initiatives, embody the Islamic principle of *khidmat-e-khalq* (creation service). When youth participate in such projects, they internalize religious compassion as a lived experience rather than a theoretical value. These activities counter the alienation that extremist recruiters exploit, replacing it with belonging and purpose grounded in faith and humanity.

Collaborative Governance and Policy Support

The sustainability of these efforts depends on policy frameworks that recognize religious institutions as development partners. Government departments, especially the Auqaf and Education ministries, should collaborate with madrassa boards and shrine administrations to design peace curricula, training programs, and interfaith events. Legal and financial transparency at shrines and madrassas will ensure credibility and trust.

At the same time, state authorities must avoid over-securitization of religion. Excessive policing of religious institutions may breed resentment; constructive engagement through dialogue, funding, and recognition of shared goals will yield better results. International donors and NGOs should also adapt their programs to respect local religious sensibilities, working within the moral vocabulary of Qur'anic and Sufi teachings rather than imposing external models.

Synthesis and Way Forward

In summary, the religious institutions and local communities of South Punjab constitute the moral backbone of society. Their revival through Qur'anic pedagogy and Sufi ethics can create a localized and authentic model of peacebuilding. Mosques can educate, madrassas can reform, shrines can inspire, and communities can unite, all guided by the divine principles of hikmah (wisdom), rahmah (mercy), and adl (justice).

A collaborative, spiritually grounded approach will ensure that peace is not merely enforced but lived, reflecting the Qur'anic aspiration: "*And we have made you a community justly balanced, that you may be witnesses over mankind*" [Al-Qur'an 2:143].

Promoting Interfaith and Intra-faith Harmony through Qur'anic and Sufi Teachings

The message of the Qur'an and the Sufi tradition has always emphasized peace, coexistence, and compassion as the foundation of human relationships. The Qur'an's inclusive vision of humanity, "O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another," sets the moral framework for interfaith and intra-faith harmony. In South Punjab, a region known for its cultural and religious diversity, these teachings have historically nurtured a spirit of coexistence among different sects, ethnicities, and religious communities. Sufi shrines such as those of Hazrat Baha-ud-Din Zakariya and Shah Rukn-e-Alam have served as centers of peace where Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims alike sought blessings and guidance (Schimmel, 1976).

Sufi Pedagogy of Peaceful Coexistence

The pedagogical methods employed by Sufis were rooted in compassion and spiritual inclusivity. They promoted the idea that the divine love of Allah transcends religious, sectarian, and linguistic boundaries. Sufi teachers in South Punjab practiced what can be called an experiential pedagogy of the heart, teaching through example, service, and compassionate dialogue rather than doctrinal argumentation (Ernst, 1999). Through poetic expressions, particularly in the works of Sufi poets like Khwaja Ghulam Farid, the message of unity and divine love reached the masses in a language they could understand and relate to. These teachings remain deeply embedded in the region's social consciousness, serving as a living force against sectarianism.

Qur'anic Ethics of Dialogue and Respect

The Qur'an calls for respectful dialogue and understanding among people of different faiths and viewpoints: "*Invite to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good instruction, and argue with them in a way that is best*" [Al-Qur'an 16:125]. This verse represents a pedagogical principle: guidance is most effective when rooted in wisdom, gentleness, and mutual respect. In Qur'anic education, particularly in madrassas influenced by Sufi values, this ethic is operationalized through curricula that emphasize ethics (*akhlaqiyat*), tolerance, and social responsibility (Rahman, 1982). This educational approach can serve as a counter-narrative to extremist ideologies that exploit religious identity to justify violence.

Social Implications for Contemporary South Punjab

In the contemporary context, the fusion of Qur'anic pedagogy and Sufi ethics provides a sustainable framework for conflict resolution and communal harmony. Where extremist groups attempt to weaponize religious identity, Sufi-oriented Qur'anic teaching redirects focus to spiritual purification (tazkiyah al-nafs), humility, and the pursuit of collective welfare (maslahah). Initiatives that revive Sufi educational practices in modern religious schools and community centers could reestablish religion as a unifying rather than divisive force (Saeed, 2021). Moreover, interfaith conferences and community service programs organized by Sufi-oriented scholars in Multan, Bahawalpur, and Dera Ghazi Khan have shown that shared ethical values can bridge sectarian divides and foster peace.

Ultimately, promoting interfaith and intra-faith harmony in South Punjab requires a revival of the Qur'anic vision of human unity and the Sufi tradition of love-centered pedagogy. Together, they represent not just a spiritual ideal but a practical methodology for cultivating a peaceful, pluralistic society rooted in mutual respect, compassion, and divine love. The synergy between these two traditions holds the key to restoring social balance and countering ideological extremism at its roots.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

The study demonstrates that Qur'anic pedagogy and Sufi values offer a robust intellectual and spiritual framework for countering extremism and promoting harmony in South Punjab. Both traditions are rooted in divine compassion (rahmah), moral responsibility (akhlaq), and the pursuit of collective wellbeing (maslahah). In a region historically shaped by Sufi teachings and Qur'anic learning, reviving these interconnected traditions can help rebuild the moral and social fabric that extremism seeks to destroy.

Synthesis of Findings

The research highlights several interlinked insights. First, the Qur'an's pedagogical method emphasizes reflection (tadabbur), moral reasoning, and the integration of knowledge with spiritual consciousness (Nasr, 2015). When properly taught, Qur'anic education nurtures critical thinking and ethical discernment qualities that immunize learners against extremist manipulation. Second, Sufi values operationalize the Qur'anic ideals of mercy, humility, and service into lived experiences. By emphasizing love over law, inclusion over exclusion, and inner reform over outward dominance, Sufism transforms religiosity into a source of peace and empathy.

Together, these two approaches form a holistic educational paradigm that engages both intellect and emotion. The Qur'an provides the cognitive framework for understanding divine guidance, while Sufi ethics provide the emotional and spiritual depth necessary to translate that understanding into compassionate action. In South Punjab, where socio-economic inequalities and sectarian narratives often fuel radicalization, this dual model offers a culturally resonant pathway toward peacebuilding and social cohesion (Kamran, 2019).

Policy Recommendations

1. **Integration of Sufi-Inspired Qur'anic Education:**
   Educational institutions, especially madaris, should incorporate Sufi ethical perspectives into Qur'anic studies. This includes teaching texts that emphasize mercy, tolerance, and social responsibility alongside traditional exegesis (tafsir).
2. **Teacher Training and Curriculum Reform:**
   Religious educators should receive training in Qur'anic pedagogy that emphasizes critical engagement and moral formation rather than rote memorization. Modern educational strategies, such as dialogue-based learning and reflective discussion, can help make Qur'anic teachings more relevant to contemporary moral challenges.
3. **Promotion of Interfaith and Intra-faith Dialogues:**

Government and religious institutions in South Punjab should organize regular dialogue sessions and community programs inspired by the inclusive models of Sufi shrines. These gatherings can serve as platforms for mutual understanding and joint social action.

4. **Cultural Revival through Sufi Heritage:**
   The preservation and revitalization of Sufi poetry, music, and art should be prioritized as vehicles of peace education. Such cultural expressions transmit ethical and spiritual values to the masses in accessible and emotionally resonant forms.
5. **Collaboration between State and Religious Institutions:**
   Policymakers should partner with religious scholars, Sufi custodians (gaddi nasheens), and local educational boards to ensure that counter-extremism strategies are rooted in indigenous moral frameworks rather than externally imposed narratives.

Final Reflections

The Qur'an and the Sufi tradition converge on a profound spiritual truth: peace is not the absence of conflict, but the presence of justice, compassion, and moral balance. By grounding educational and social reform in these principles, South Punjab can emerge as a model for harmonious coexistence rooted in its own religious and cultural heritage. The fusion of Qur'anic pedagogy and Sufi values is not only a theological ideal but also a practical roadmap for nurturing resilient communities capable of rejecting hatred and embracing divine love.

Author Contributions

Sajjad Hussain and Hafiz Muhammad Mudassar Shafique contributed to the conceptualization, development of the theoretical framework, literature review, investigation of historical and theological sources, analytical synthesis, interpretation, and preparation of the manuscript. Both authors contributed to writing—original draft and writing—review and editing. Both authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no financial, professional, religious, institutional, or personal conflicts of interest that could have influenced the arguments or conclusions presented in this article.

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Data Availability

No new empirical dataset was generated or analysed during this study. The article is based on the analysis and synthesis of Qur'anic sources, Islamic scholarly works, historical materials, institutional reports, and published academic literature cited in the manuscript.

Ethical Approval

Ethical approval was not required because the study was based entirely on publicly available documentary, historical, theological, and scholarly sources and did not involve human participants, animals, or identifiable personal data.

Informed Consent

Not applicable. No human participants were recruited and no primary personal information was collected.

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The authors declare that no generative artificial intelligence tools were used to generate the scholarly arguments, theological interpretations, analysis, or conclusions presented in this article.

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