
The Role of Sufi Ethical Pedagogy in Countering Violent Extremism among Pakistani Youth

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Abstract

This article examines the potential of Sufi ethical pedagogy—known as *tarbiyah al-akhlaq* (the cultivation of moral character)—as a culturally grounded, spiritually resonant strategy for countering violent extremism among Pakistani youth. In a context where radical ideologies exploit religious illiteracy, socio-economic marginalization, and identity crises, Sufi traditions offer an alternative framework rooted in compassion (*rahmah*), inner purification (*tazkiyat al-nafs*), and service to humanity (*khidmat-e-khalq*). Drawing on fieldwork in Punjab, Sindh, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and analysis of curricula from Sufi-affiliated educational institutions, this study demonstrates how *tarbiyah*-based programs foster resilience against extremist narratives by nurturing ethical subjectivity, emotional intelligence, and communal belonging. The article argues that Sufi pedagogy does not merely “counter” extremism through opposition but preempts it through holistic moral formation. It aligns with Pakistan’s National Action Plan (NAP) and National Counter-Extremism Policy while affirming indigenous Islamic resources for peace building.

Keywords: Sufism, *Tarbiyah Al-Akhlaq*, Violent Extremism, Youth, Pakistan, Moral Education, Counter-Radicalization, Islamic Ethics

Introduction

Pakistan has faced persistent challenges from violent extremism, particularly among disenfranchised youth vulnerable to radical recruitment. Since the early

2000s, militant groups have exploited religious rhetoric, economic despair, and political alienation to justify violence, often framing it as a sacred duty.¹

In response, the state has prioritized security measures and deradicalization programs, yet these efforts frequently neglect the deeper moral and spiritual dimensions that drive ideological commitment.²

This article proposes that Sufi ethical pedagogy—*tarbiyah al-akhlaq*—offers a potent, homegrown antidote to extremist worldviews. Rooted in centuries of South Asian Islamic tradition, *tarbiyah* emphasizes the transformation of the self through disciplined moral practice, spiritual mentorship (*murshid-murīd* relationship), and service to creation.³

Unlike legalistic or militarized interpretations of Islam, Sufism foregrounds love (*maḥabbah*), mercy, and inner purity as the essence of faith.⁴

In Pakistan, where Sufi shrines, *khanqāhs* (spiritual lodges), and *silsilas* (orders) remain deeply embedded in social life—especially in rural and semi-urban areas—this tradition provides a culturally intelligible language for ethical formation.⁵

This study investigates how contemporary Sufi-inspired educational initiatives translate classical *tarbiyah* principles into youth programs that build psychological resilience, critical religious literacy, and social cohesion.

The research draws on field observations (2023–2024) in Lahore, Multan, Karachi, and Peshawar; interviews with *pīrs* (Sufi masters), educators, and program participants; and analysis of curricular materials from institutions such as the Al-Khidmat Foundation’s *Akhlaq* modules and the Minhaj-ul-Quran Youth League.⁶

Conceptual Foundations: Tarbiyah al-Akhlaq in Sufi Thought

- **Tarbiyah al-akhlaq** is not merely moral instruction but a lifelong process of soul cultivation. The term *tarbiyah* derives from the root *r-b-w*, meaning

“to nurture,” “to rear,” or “to cause to grow”—evoking the image of a gardener tending to a plant.⁷

- In Sufi cosmology, the human soul (*nafs*) is prone to base desires (*nafs al-ammārah*), but through disciplined practice, it can ascend to the stage of moral conscience (*nafs al-lawwāmah*) and ultimately attain tranquility (*nafs al-muṭmaʿinnah*).⁸

This transformation is guided by the Qurʾanic injunction: “He has certainly succeeded who purifies himself”.⁹

Classical Sufi scholars like Al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) systematized this process in works such as *Iḥyāʾ ʿUlūm al-Dīn*, where he links ethical virtues—patience, gratitude, humility, honesty—to spiritual states (*aḥwāl*) and stations (*maqāmāt*).¹⁰

For Al-Ghazālī, true knowledge (*ʿilm*) is inseparable from righteous action (*ʿamal*) and inner sincerity (*ikhhlās*).¹¹

In the South Asian context, Sufi masters like Shaykh ʿAbd al-Qādir Jīlānī (whose *silsila* is widely followed in Pakistan) and Data Ganj Bakhsh (Ali Hujwiri, d. 1077) emphasized *akhlaq* as the foundation of Islamic life.¹²

The latter wrote in *Kashf al-Maḥjūb*: “The essence of Sufism is good character; whoever excels in character has excelled in Sufism.”¹³

Thus, *tarbiyah* is inherently anti-extremist: it rejects violence as a symptom of an unrefined soul and promotes peace as the fruit of inner harmony.

The Appeal of Extremism and the Moral Vacuum

Violent extremist groups in Pakistan often target youth aged 15–25—a demographic marked by identity exploration, idealism, and susceptibility to charismatic authority.¹⁴

Recruiters exploit three key vulnerabilities:

1. Religious Illiteracy:

Many youth lack deep understanding of Islamic ethics, making them susceptible to literalist or decontextualized interpretations of scripture.¹⁵

2. **Socio-Economic Marginalization:**

Unemployment, lack of educational opportunities, and perceived injustice fuel resentment.¹⁶

3. **Moral Alienation:**

In rapidly urbanizing contexts, traditional ethical frameworks erode, leaving youth without moral anchors.¹⁷

Extremist narratives fill this vacuum by offering a clear identity (“defender of Islam”), a sense of purpose (“jihad”), and a community of belonging.¹⁸ critically, they frame violence as a moral imperative—a distortion that Sufi *tarbiyah* directly counters by recentring Islam on mercy and self-restraint.

As one former extremist in Peshawar confessed during rehabilitation: “They told me killing was worship. But my grandmother’s prayers taught me that worship is kindness.”¹⁹

This anecdote underscores the power of embodied ethics over ideological abstraction—a core tenet of Sufi pedagogy.

Sufi Ethical Pedagogy in Practice: Contemporary Models

Several Pakistani organizations have operationalized *tarbiyah al-akhlaq* into structured youth programs:

1. The Minhaj-ul-Quran Youth League (MQYL)

Founded by Shaykh-ul-Islam Dr. Muhammad Tahir-ul-Qadri, MQYL integrates Sufi ethics into its national youth network. Its curriculum includes:

- Weekly *dars* on *akhlaq* using Al-Ghazālī’s *Iḥyā’* and local Sufi poetry;
- Community service (*khidmat*) projects like blood drives and tree planting;
- Conflict resolution workshops based on the Prophetic model of forgiveness.²⁰

A 2023 evaluation found that 87% of MQYL participants demonstrated increased empathy and rejection of violent rhetoric.²¹

2. Al-Khidmat Foundation’s “Akhlāq for Peace” Initiative

Operating in over 50 districts, this program trains youth volunteers in Sufi-inspired ethics. Key components include:

- Storytelling sessions featuring Sufi parables of tolerance (e.g., Rumi's tales of unity);
- Mentorship by local *pīrs* who model humility and service;
- Interfaith *iftārs* during Ramadan to build social bridges.²²

In flood-affected areas of Sindh, Al-Khidmat youth distributed aid while reciting *dhikr* (remembrance of God), framing relief as spiritual practice.²³

3. Shrine-Based Tarbiyah Circles

At major shrines like Data Darbar (Lahore) and Lal Shahbaz Qalandar (Sehwan), weekly *majālis* gather youth for:

- Recitation of *manāqib* (virtues of saints);
- Collective *sama* (devotional music) to cultivate emotional regulation;
- Counseling on anger management and patience (*ṣabr*).²⁴

After the 2017 Sehwan suicide bombing, shrine leaders intensified these circles, explicitly linking Sufi ethics to anti-violence messaging.²⁵

These models share a common pedagogy: they prioritize experiential learning over dogma, relationship over rules, and inner transformation over external compliance.

Mechanisms of Resilience: How Tarbiyah Counters Extremism

Sufi *tarbiyah* builds resilience through four interrelated mechanisms:

1. Reclaiming Religious Narrative

By teaching that the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was “sent as mercy to the worlds” *tarbiyah* reframes Islam as a religion of compassion, not conquest.²⁶

Youth learn to critique extremist interpretations using classical sources, not secular arguments.

2. Emotional Regulation

Sufi practices like *dhikr*, *muraqabah* (meditation), and *sama* help youth manage anger, anxiety, and impulsivity—key drivers of violent behavior.²⁷

Neuroscience studies confirm that rhythmic chanting reduces amygdala reactivity, promoting calm.²⁸

3. Ethical Community Building

Tarbiyah fosters *ummah*-consciousness through service, replacing the exclusivist “us vs. them” logic of extremism with inclusive solidarity.²⁹

4. Spiritual Mentorship

The *murshid-murīd* relationship provides personalized guidance, filling the void left by absent fathers or disengaged teachers.³⁰ A trusted elder becomes a moral compass, offering wisdom without coercion.

Alignment with National Policy and Islamic Principles

Sufi *tarbiyah* aligns with Pakistan’s strategic frameworks:

- The National Action Plan (NAP) calls for promoting “moderate and inclusive” religious discourse.³¹
- The National Counter-Extremism Policy (2023) emphasizes “soft approaches” including education and community engagement.³²
- The National Curriculum includes *akhlaq* as a core subject in Islamic Studies.³³

Critically, this approach avoids “de-radicalization” language that stigmatizes youth. Instead, it offers positive identity formation—what scholars call “pre-radicalization prevention.”³⁴

Moreover, it draws on indigenous Islamic resources, avoiding the perception of Western-imposed solutions. As one *pīr* in Multan stated: “We don’t need foreign theories. Our *silsila* has healed hearts for 800 years.”³⁵

Challenges and Considerations

Despite its promise, Sufi *tarbiyah* faces challenges:

- **Misrepresentation:** Some hardline groups dismiss Sufism as “innovation” (*bid‘ah*), requiring careful theological framing.³⁶
- **Scalability:** Personalized mentorship is resource-intensive; digital tools (e.g., *akhlaq* apps) are being piloted to expand reach.³⁷
- **Gender Inclusion:** While many programs now include girls, traditional *khanqāhs* remain male-dominated, necessitating parallel female-led initiatives.³⁸

Nonetheless, the demand is high: 72% of surveyed youth in KP expressed interest in *tarbiyah* programs if accessible.³⁹

Conclusion

Sufi ethical pedagogy offers a profound, culturally rooted response to the crisis of violent extremism in Pakistan. By cultivating *akhlaq*—not through coercion but through love, service, and spiritual discipline—it addresses the moral and emotional voids that extremists exploit.

This is not a call to replace security measures but to complement them with soul-centered education. As the Qur’an reminds: “Indeed, Allah does not change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves” .⁴⁰

Tarbiyah al-akhlaq empowers Pakistani youth to make that inner change—transforming not only themselves but the future of the nation.

In honoring its Sufi heritage, Pakistan affirms a vision of Islam that is peaceful, compassionate, and resilient—a vision that has sustained its civilization for centuries and can guide it into the future.

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