



## EMPOWERMENT OF RELIGIOUS MINORITY COMMUNITIES AND PROMOTION OF UNDERSTANDING FOR PEACE AND TOLERANCE IN BALOCHISTAN, PAKISTAN

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### **Abstract**

*Religious minorities in Pakistan have suffered from severe marginalization since the creation of the country in 1947. State machinery has failed to protect basic rights and ensure equity, peace and freedom of life, speech and religion for the minority communities. The onset waves of religious extremism, fundamentalism and events of global politics have kept the life of minorities at high risk in different parts of the country. This research study aims to explore factors that weaken in the empowerment of religious minority communities to protect their rights and promote understanding for equity, peace and tolerance in Balochistan province of Pakistan. The study is qualitative in nature. A total of 04 Focus Group Discussions were conducted and 17 key informants were interviewed to obtain primary data from representatives of all religious minority communities and the majority population including the duty bearers. Thematic analytical approach was adapted to analyze the data. The study analyzes the political, institutional, judicial, social, educational and economic dimensions that act as bottlenecks in the empowerment of religious minority communities to protect their rights and promote understanding for tolerance, peace, harmony and equity with the majority community. The study suggests*



*broader policy and practice focused interventions and grass-root level programs.*

**Key words:** Religious minority, empowerment, rights, extremism, peace and tolerance

## **Introduction**

Humankind is alike everywhere. They equally share all threats and challenges of world of today and tomorrow. However, all humans unfortunately do not have equal access to opportunities to explore and payback. Differences prevail with varying degrees and intensity due to disproportionate distribution of resources as a result of partial political and administrative decisions. Apart from unjust access to resources, there are certain powerful factors that divide human beings. The vested interests of various groups within the framework of services delivery mechanism divide humans as consumers and providers (Malik, 2002). Class based social systems and religion has been the most commanding factors for division among masses. Lines being drawn by religions are convincing to extend that it can provoke people at large to get indulged into bloody conflicts, dislocation and permanent alienation both internally and externally (Bielefeldt, 2017). To respond it, several conventions and declarations have been introduced internationally such as Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and various conventions about elimination of discrimination on the basis of caste and creed for ensuring harmony, peace and coexistence (Raina, 2014). However, the trickle impacts of all such commitment are yet to be observed across continents.

Today's world, from a religious perspective, is largely divided into certain parts. Many countries of south are predominantly dwelled by Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists, whereas most of countries of north, particularly, western countries are characterized with Christians, Jews, and non-religious population (Banducci, et al. 2004). Beside Pakistan, there are many other countries as Islamic states, however; none is purely populated with cent percent Muslim population, having religious minorities of non-Muslims. Similarly, Christians and non-religious population is the majority proportion of masses in most of European countries. In Pakistan, a small proportion of its population is comprised of religious minorities. Among different religious minority groups include Christians, Hindus, Beha'is, Ahmadis, Sikh, Parsi (Zoroastrians), Kalashis and Buddhists (Saleem, 2000).

A good majority of all religious minorities' population live in Quetta- the capital city of Balochistan Province (Bakht, 2014). They are settled in several localities both in downtown and suburbs of the city (Changezi, et al. 2018). Majority of religious minorities are faced with issues of discrimination due to lack of awareness and insufficient law



enforcement among masses. Amongst minorities, Christians and Hindu are relatively more deprived and at high risk of biased treatment by majority population, while Zoroastrians, Beha'is and Qadyani for being economically better social class, do not face discrimination and rights violation (Changezi, et al. 2018). Nevertheless, the existing scenario requires well planned pragmatic efforts to bring about changes into people's mindsets, and functioning of social and administrative institutions to make it conducive for religious minorities for finding enough space to participate into socio-economic development.

## **Literature Review**

### **International Perspective of Religious Minorities**

While focusing today's worldview from a religious perspective, the globe is broadly divided into certain parts. Many countries of Asia are predominantly dwelled by Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists, while most of western countries are characterized with Christians, Jews, and non-religious population. Iran, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Malaysia, Indonesia, Afghanistan, United Arab Emirates, etc. claim to be Islamic states (Das, 2010), however, none of these Islamic states are solely populated with cent percent Muslim population. Discriminatory behavior prevails against religious minorities in states. International instruments condemn discrimination against minorities of all types but tragically, some nations have published lists of religious groups described as potentially dangerous sects (HRCF, 2001). Anti-sect commissions have been set up, investigative personals have been trained, and restrictive laws passed, however; hundreds of thousands of innocent believers are now under official suspicion and are treated as second-class citizens in many countries of Islamic, Hindu and Jewish states (Khan and Rahman, 2009). All this violates religious freedom, which is the most basic and essential of the fundamental rights of humankind.

Christians and non-religious population for being majority population in European countries where state of affairs is relatively better because of the some reasons. First, since European societies are democratic, therefore, religious faith is dealt with as personal matter. Decisions at any level is not influenced with emotional and ideological thinking, thus the right to choose religion or even remain without being follower of any religion has social sanctioning. Secondly, for being economically sound, individuals have lots of options for earning livelihood. Consequently, chances of overlapping and clash of interests gets shortened. Thirdly, due to promising percentage of education level and sensitization about rights and responsibilities is not ambiguous. As a result, minorities of all type are protected. However, occurrence of small incidents is still evident (Das, 2010).

### **State of Religious Minorities in Asia and Middle-East**



Among orthodox Muslim countries, Iran and Saudi Arabia are mostly inhabited by Shi'ite and Sunny sects respectively (Belge and Ekrem, 2015). Proportionately, about 15% of Iranian population comprises of non-Muslims. Iran had never been a friendly country to religious minorities. Similarly, Saudi Arabia has been considered rigid part of the world as far as coexistence on religious ground is concerned. Incidences of biased treatment to minorities are frequently reported (Moniruzzaman, 2014). However, with the emergence of recent government, flexibility and softness of policies is apparently observed regarding fundamental rights of religious minorities in the kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Centuries ago, millions of Zoroastrians, for not finding environment conducive, took refuge into today's Pakistan and India where they found it relatively better and supportive to live in (Simonian, 2006). India, one of the most populace countries of world, is predominantly dwelled by Hindu (Hindu American Foundation, 2017). It is widely proclaimed that India is a secular state which houses hundreds of religious and ethnic minorities. However, religious minorities do find little space to live freely. Discrimination is an inbuilt mechanism in Hinduism due to century's long class based social system. All jobs, professions and activities are classified in the social classed based system, which force individuals to get indulged into discrimination (Sonawani, 2017). Israel is the only Jewish state in today's world map. Jews are dominating population in most of the European countries due to their socio-economic and political status. They also claim to be the champions of democracy, human rights and tolerance, however, reports of discrimination have been reported in the country (Sapir and Statman, 2015).

### **State of Religious Minorities in Pakistan**

After the partition of subcontinent in 1947, millions of Hindus and Muslims migrated across the border at the cost of their life and honor (Mughal and Jivan, 1996). However, a great population even then decided to live in both sides of the border as religious minority groups (Tahir and Tahira, 2016). Today, Pakistan contains a great number of different religious and ethnic population having diversified beliefs, cultural patterns, languages and socio-economic conditions (Yousaf, 2016). The different minority groups include Christians, Hindus, Beha'is, Ahmadis, Sikh, Parsi (Zoroastrians), Kalashis and Buddhists. The role of religion in Pakistan is not a settled problem, rather it highly influences the status and rights of religious minorities and there is a big question on the internal security and peace situation (Rais, 2004).

The socio-economic status of religious minorities in Pakistan is vulnerable (Ackerman, 2018). Indicators of socio-economic conditions of religious minorities show that they are mostly lagging behind where the most vulnerable are Christians (Khalid and Anwar, 2018) & (Rais, 2004). Similarly, Hindus in Pakistan in general and in Sindh province in particular are economically more deprived (South Asia Partnership-Pakistan, 2015).



National Council for Justice and Peace (NCJP) in Pakistan studied the literacy rates of religious minorities in Pakistan. According to the [NCJP's report \(2014\)](#), the average literacy rate among Christians in Punjab is 34% compared to the national average of 46.56 per cent. Among minority women, the rate is terribly low. The average literacy rate among Hindus and others (including Parsi, Buddhists and Sikhs) is 34 per cent, 19 per cent and 17 percent, respectively. However, for Ahmadis it is higher i.e. 51.67 per cent.

Religious minorities play a pivotal role in the economic development of the country ([Majid, 2014](#)) while on socio-political grounds, their role is almost invisible. Being victims of unwanted routine incidents, social discrimination, religious intolerance, violent acts and biased behavior ([FIDH/HRCP, 2014](#)) the minority groups are limited to live in congested colonies ([Mehmood, et al. 2014](#)). There are several factors that create negative thinking among religious minorities in Pakistan, for example, they are segregated in school syllabus ([Tariq, 2012](#)). Lack of awareness about legal, social and religious rights combined with low capacity and self-conceived/imposed barriers cause many restrictions to them, thus affecting their potential role in the overall development of the nation ([MRG/SDPI, 2014](#)). The killings of religious minorities in the shelter of blasphemy laws have happened time and again ([Mehfooz, 2021](#)). These killings range from public representatives to common religious minorities engulfing both man and the women. Some of the assassinations have been accepted by religious groups ([Pak Institute for Peace Studies, 2014](#)).

Balochistan is the largest province of the country, in terms of geography, additionally, it is also one of the richest parts in terms of skilled human resource and ecological diversity. A huge population of the province consisted of religious minorities before the partition of sub-continent including Hindus, Sikhs and Christians ([Bakht and Begum, 2014](#)) but due to security reasons, many had to migrate to India.—Hindus, Sikhs and Christians in particular. However, currently there is a good number of minority population including Christians, Hindus, Ahmadis, Parsi, Sikhs and Beha'is in Balochistan particularly in the provincial capital Quetta. Likewise, Quetta is also rich in terms of diversity of humans on basis of language, ethnicity and religious faith. Its total population is roughly estimated to be around 2.5 million human souls, which comprises both Muslims and non-Muslims ([Changezi, et al. 2018](#)). The religious minority communities are faced with a number of issues pertaining to their empowerment to protect their basic rights and promote understanding of equity, peace, tolerance and harmony with the majority population – the Muslims.

### **Methodology**

The study was carried out in Quetta – the capital city of Balochistan province of Pakistan. The study was qualitative in nature which engulfed data from secondary sources combined

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with a series of Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and semi-structured interviews with key informants (KIIs) and In-depth Individual Interviews (IDIs) of both majority and religious minority population groups in the province. Purposive-snowball sampling technique was implied to selected key informants and individuals for semi-structured interviews. Data was analyzed via thematic analytical approach to draw findings and reach conclusion.

### **Selection of Themes and Variables**

Based on review of literature, interviews with individuals, the following dimensions as the themes, sub-themes and variables were selected for this study.

| <b>Dimensions</b>        | <b>Sub-theme/complex variables</b>          |
|--------------------------|---|
| Political dimensions     | International politics/ religious incidents |
|                          | Political participation and integration     |
| Institutional dimensions | Role of civil bureaucracy                   |
|                          | Allocation of seats for minorities          |
|                          | Dictatorship / feudal system                |
|                          | Violation of fundamental human rights       |
|                          | Social safety net                           |
|                          | Segregation in professions                  |
| Judicial dimensions      | Responses to laws and universal commitment  |
|                          | Use/misuse of Blasphemy laws                |
| Social dimensions        | Social integration                          |
|                          | Feeling of insecurity and extremism         |
|                          | Behavioral issues                           |
|                          | Change of religious faith/ conversion       |
|                          | Awareness                                   |
|                          | Self-imposed restrictions                   |
| Educational dimensions   | Ignorance:                                  |
|                          | Biased curriculum                           |
|                          | Religious education for minorities          |
| Economic dimension       | Mass poverty                                |
| Media                    | Hatred speech                               |



## **Results and Discussion:**

Based on different themes, the following findings were drawn from Focus Group Discussions and interviews with key informants as representatives of both majority & minority groups in Balochistan.

### **1. Political dimensions**

**1.1 Repercussion of international politics/ religious incidents:** As a part of international political scenario, there have been several incidences where Muslims have been victimized across continents. This has its negative impact in Muslim states. As a matter of retaliation, people record their discontent; however, extremist groups get involved violently. Non-Muslims were at high risk during such situations. Another conflict between Muslims and non-Muslims lies within the context of war against terror. Any attack on any group and their interests is considered serious threat to life and property on both parties.

**1.2 Low political participation and integration:** Religious minorities show very low participation on political and social arena. This could have several reasons, however; one major cause is the lack of integration of majority and minorities in political parties. Most of the major political parties have formed their minority wings, which in itself prevent political integration. Besides, overall performance as ruling parties has contributed into disappointment among masses. Thus, mostly issues are not tackled politically but through violent tactics.

### **2. Institutional dimensions**

**2.1 Role of Civil Bureaucracy:** Civil bureaucracy has pivotal role at institutional level. They are believed to be the strongest group to adjourn efforts pertaining to policy and decision making. Their role has been very critical in making hurdles against efforts pertaining to protection of people's interests including religious minorities.

**2.2 Lack of practice on allocated seats for minorities:** Though there is specified allocated quota for religious minorities in professional services and educational institutions, no sincere political will and wise implementation is practiced. Lengthy and defective procedures combined with biased attitude make it difficult for minorities to avail and explore economic avenues. The allocation needs to be revised with proportion of increase in population from time to time. The quota allocation should be safeguarded through constitutional support mechanism.



**2.3 Dictatorship / feudal system:** Dictatorship and feudalism have been ruling Pakistan since long before its appearance on the globe as an independent state. Both the systems have had towering contribution to the violation of Human Rights. The governance system of dictatorship and feudalism had never been friendly to under privileged and minorities.

**2.4 Violation of fundamental Human Rights:** Protection of constitutionally guaranteed fundamental rights of all humankind had never been ensured on operational grounds. Thus, the violation of rights is not an issue only for religious minorities, in fact; it is related to every human being living in this country. Much is required to improve the deteriorating situation of rights.

**2.5 Poor social safety net:** Principally, provision of basic social services such as health, education, shelter and healthy living environment are the prime responsibility of state and government machinery. However, in Pakistan this social safety net is either defective or non-existent, which does not cater for the need of people. Consequently, the marginalized segments of population including religious minorities are faced with exploitation and violation of their rights.

**2.6 Unrespectable professional segregation:** Most of the Christians of the country are believed to be converted from lower cast of Hindu. Since they used to serve the rest of other social classes, they got it permanently tagged with them. Thus, poor Christians and lowest social class of Hindu continued to render service of sanitary workers in Pakistan after independence. Even today most of the uneducated Christians are restrained to this profession. They seldom receive opportunities to opt for other jobs. This group expectation has raised serious issues that contribute into frustration and confine ways and means. The educated ones face difficulty while performing jobs due to prevalence of biased attitudes.

### **3. Judicial dimensions**

**3.1 Poor responses to laws and universal commitment:** The constitution guarantees almost all basic rights to all citizens; moreover, Pakistan is also the signatory of several conventions regarding human and minority rights. Nevertheless, the existing legal framework and conventions are occasionally enforced and catered according to its true letter and spirit. The situation requires major changes, indeed, through logical and participatory consultative processes.

**3.2 Negative and personal use of Blasphemy laws:** Blasphemy law was introduced in Pakistan to provide legal protective shield to doctrine of ideology of Islam and to avoid



any sort of misleading propaganda. However, this law is a serious threat to religious minorities. Religious minorities can be threatened to their life and property by vested economic interests groups. Several examples of such kinds exit in the country where blasphemy law was used by majority population groups for vested economic interests.

#### **4. Social dimensions**

**4.1 Lack of integration:** Due to many reasons associated to feeling of insecurity has been the main reason for isolated lifestyle in the provincial capital. Apart from religious minorities, the Muslim population is widely excluded from each other. The prevailing type of living patterns is categorized on ethnic basis. One geographical area is purely populated by one specific ethnic group like Pashttonabad by Pashtton, Sariab by Brahvis / Baloch and Marriabad by Hazara community. This segregated lifestyle in itself is social exclusion. Similarly, religious minorities dwell in segregated colonies, which is not thoroughfare.

**4.2 Feeling of insecurity and extremism:** Feeling of insecurity is prevalent among general masses, however, its nature and intensity is relatively much severe among religious minorities. The repeated incidents of past many years have taught them to remain isolated and confined to their own sphere of communities. Majority population is Muslim and thus any tiny issue regarding religion is taken at large and severe reaction is observed against the religious minorities

**4.3 Behavioral Issues:** As an immediate impact of lack of social justice on ground of distribution of resources, biased attitude is a common feature of daily routine life in province and country. However, its intensity gets further increased in the case of religious minorities. They receive biased treatment during their entire social interaction, particularly, in matters when economic interests are involved.

**4.4 Change of religious faith/ conversion:** Almost all religious minorities are tantalized with never ending issue of change of their native ideological faith / belief either forcefully or intentionally as a result of preaching by majority population. Young Hindu and Christian girls are kidnapped for marry and reported it as love marriage (Alex, 2014) (Asian Human Rights Commission, 2011). While preaching of Islamic preaching groups (*TABLIGHIS*) also worked to toward conversion. Protection of vested interests is another major aspect commonly found among religious minorities in the field of conversion / change of ideological faith.

**4.5 Lack of awareness:** Ignorance combined with lack of awareness about rights and responsibilities, is a common characteristic among masses. This, not only contributes into



prevalence of many social problems, but also creates confusion leading to violation of rights of others. Because the concept of right does not exist as such, therefore, its violation is vividly evident. Violation of rights of minorities is not an exception.

**4.6 Self-imposed restrictions:** It is widely evident in daily affairs of life that religious minorities are excluded in the country. Most of the time one major reason for exclusion is the self-imposed restriction that religious minorities put on them. They intentionally avoid participating in events and gatherings. The security issues further restrict them into their own affairs within their residential colonies.

## **5. Media.**

**5.1 Hatred speech:** Mass media both electronic and press are not socially align as far as social issues and prevalence of violation of rights are concerned. The most alarming aspect of media's weakness is that it has been telecasting program and shows that further widen the gap between the majority and minorities' population instead of engulfing the gaps and focusing the bottleneck. The concept of alternative media can work for promotion of human and minorities' rights.

## **6. Educational dimensions**

**6.1 Ignorance:** Apart from 1/3 urban population that have access to basic services , majority population- irrespective of their belief system, still live in rural set up, where shortage of educational facilities confine people's access to education and its associated facilities. Thus ignorance prevails at all level of social life. This definitely contributes into deteriorating situation; let it be human rights or minorities rights.

**6.2 Biased curriculum:** The entire educational curriculum is not religious minorities friendly. It has very little course contents pertaining to reduce gap between individuals belonging to various religions. However, much stuff can be seen, which widens the gap between Muslims and Non-Muslims.

**6.3 Religious education for minorities:** Since Pakistan is an ideological state; therefore, all aspects of country affairs had been Islamized including education sector. No mechanism is established to cater for religious education of minorities. Majority population has access to get religious education in all set up of government and private schools, while minorities has no or very limited access. This keeps religious minorities far behind to receive inputs about their religions like majority population.



## **7. Economic dimension**

**7.1 Mass poverty:** Due to high rate of mass poverty, opportunities and economic avenues are distributed among majority population unjustly. Religious minorities receive much lesser proportions, thus remain relatively poorer. Poverty does not allow analyzing social life, identifying a problem that tantalizes their life.

## **Conclusion**

Initiating a vibrant movement to activate masses for endeavoring towards promotion and protection of human and minorities rights is a multifaceted difficult task that requires interventions on diverse avenues, indeed, with active involvement of relevant stakeholders. Government and citizens – as provider and receivers are equally responsible to play roles to safeguard rights. Protection of religious minorities' rights entrusted through constitution and further enriched with international commitment at global level is rather delicate in countries where state of human rights is not yet satisfactory. Rights and responsibilities are reciprocal. The one who is responsible is more sensitized about his / her rights, while those who seek rights must act more responsibly. A number of external and internal determinants contribute to the deteriorating situation of religious minority communities' empowerment, protection of their rights, and promoting understanding for equity, peace and tolerance in the province. External factors are the result of international political phenomenon and incidents–having adverse effects in our society and upon which we have very little control. Whereas, internal factors that lie within the mandate include effective political participation, social integration and social safety nets for religious minorities along with prevention of hatred speech, pro-active role of social activists, civil bureaucracy, law enforcement agencies and research based interventions. Review of curriculum in the light of narrowing gape between minorities and majority population is needed to be carried out to integrate religious minority communities in the race of national development through a persistent and pragmatic approach.



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