



THE RISING MARGINALIZATION OF RELIGIOUS MINORITIES: A CASE OF PAKISTAN

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Abstract

Minorities have faced discrimination in the social and political sphere in Pakistan since the country's inception. Discrimination and oppression against minorities have been observed on numerous occasions. The concerned institutions have remained unsuccessful in securing minorities' rights and honoring those principles on which Pakistan was established. Minorities in the country complain about forced marriage, religious conversions, marginal participation in elections, government jobs and exclusion in social life etc. This paper intends to highlight the marginalization and discrimination faced by minorities. It also focuses on how such discrimination and marginalization against minorities can be eradicated, where minorities can enjoy equal rights as Muslims.

Key words: Minorities, Rights, Discriminations, Equality.

Introduction

Religious minorities of the country have been facing discrimination, mistreatment and hatred at the hands of radicals and extremists since Pakistan. Muhammad Ali Jinnah the founder of Pakistan wished for a state where the values like tolerance, impartiality, equity, forbearance and co-existence could be embedded. He insisted both the religious communities and minorities to respect



each other for a united nation where the former would not affect the latter (Singh J. , 2010). Jinnah expressed his views regarding the relationship between minorities and the Muslims on 11 August 1947 'I think as a nation we all should keep in our mind that in future Hindus in the country would always be Hindus and Muslims would also be Muslims without the interference from the state, as religion or faith is the personal belief of every citizen (Singh M. P., 2009). Jinnah was certain that the new country would improve the socio-economic conditions of its citizens regardless of any faith. He was also sure that people of each belief and religion would surely live as equal citizens. On 11 August 1947, in his most famous speech, Jinnah elaborated that "you are free to go to your temples, you are free to go to your mosques or any other places of worship in the State of Pakistan. You may belong to any religion or caste or creed that has nothing to do with the business of the State" (Allana, 1969, pp. 407-11). This statement is a lucid and convincing manifestation of Jinnah's attitude towards minorities. This address to the Constituent Assembly is a synopsis of Jinnah's assessments of the role of religion and the state. Jinnah knew that minorities have distinct traditions and cultures and such variations in Muslim dominant society make the minority a separate entity and that separate entity needs special attention and protection (Jalal, 1985, p. 14). After Muhammad Ali's demise, the political establishment which came to rule did not endorse his vision of the state. The political establishment did not grant minorities the rights and status as Muslims (Rais, 2004, p. 451). The political institutions have remained unable to provide minorities an equal representation in all sectors of Pakistan. This incompetency of institutions created a vacuum that was brusquely filled by the Islamists. The Islamists did every tread to make minorities second-class citizens against the wishes of the country's founder. The non-Muslim minorities in Pakistan could not achieve equal rights, privileges and social justice as the Muslims in the country (Ahmad, 1992, p. 121; Ali, 1967, p. 239).

In the development and prosperity of Pakistan, minorities have played a significant role. Their role in medicine and treatment has remained commendable. They put their religious aspiration and belief on one side and humanity on the other to serve Pakistan vigorously like other devoted Pakistanis. Their contributions to medical arrangements both in rural and remote areas have been praiseworthy and admirable. The Church organizations and Christian missions served eagerly in the development of Pakistan. In this regard, the contribution and involvement of other minorities in Pakistan's development are no less striking. The hospitals controlled and managed by minorities are best equipped with qualified doctors and facilities. A lot of them have received national awards for their services and contributions to Pakistan.

The Parsis have also served well in Pakistan, particularly in the field of medical care. The contribution of Anklesaria Hospital in serving the people of Karachi is an excellent example of their great devotion and loyalty to Pakistan. The Hindus of Pakistan despite their petite population have a significant role in the medical domain. Even after the partition, their services for Pakistan are enormous and remarkable. Sir Ganga Ram Hospital and Gulab Devi Hospital are vital examples of their kind generosity, compassion and enthusiasm to help suffering humanity. Numerous hospitals managed by minorities are providing priceless service to all Pakistanis without



distinction of faith. Along with the hospitals, several dispensaries are run by the Hindu community working in different parts of Sind. Many of the Pakistan movement leaders like Quaid-e-Azam and Allama Iqbal were educated in Christian schools and colleges. Apart from them, a majority of our political and military leaders have got educated in missionary institutions. The privileged and elite classes of Pakistan prefer Christian schools for their children's education even today.

Pakistan's majority population believes in coexistence, however, they become reticent whenever minorities are marginalized and deprived of their legal rights. Owing to their faith and belief minorities of Pakistan become a victim of violence and aggression from extremist and radical elements of society. Across the country, different religious minorities fear of hostility and intimidation from extremists and violent groups regarding their faith and belief (Dawn, 2009; Hashmi, 2016). The minority believes Pakistan's constitution cannot provide them protection, security and equal rights. Moreover, Pakistan's constitutional framework mainly promotes Islamic culture and ideology and marginalizes minorities by denying minorities their legal and genuine rights. Whenever minorities demand their legitimate rights, the ruling elite of the state isolate or segregate them. They are even sidelined from the decision-making process (Paul, 2009). The next section highlights in detail how minority groups are discriminated in different aspects of life.

Discrimination in the Election Process

Muslim leadership under the patronage of Muhammad Ali Jinnah eagerly demanded a separate electorate for the Muslims before the partition. However, non-Muslim citizens of Pakistan even when Pakistan consisted of East and West parts, neither demanded a separate electorate nor supported this idea. The majority of the religious minority groups believe that the separate electorate system is inconvenient because the minority population is scattered across Pakistan. In Sindh, Hindus are a considerable minority, Punjab has Christian and Sikhs, and the remaining provinces have few thousand non-Muslim citizens. Consequently, constructing a constituency for a separate electorate is problematic (Mustafa, Ahmad, & Arsalan, 2021).

After independence, the politician of Pakistan supported a joint electorate for all citizens until General Zia ul Haq amended the Constitution and imposed a separate electorate. "A joint electorate has its pros and cons. It is an accessible and inclusive mode of participation. Moreover, it neglects the demand of non-Muslim voters and focuses on a majority vote. Society has its norms and sense of discrimination against non-Muslims, so they cannot give a vote to a non-Muslim candidate easily. As a result, reserve seats are distributed to the minority leadership" (Mustafa, Ahmad, & Arsalan, 2021, p. 625).

In the National Assembly of Pakistan, there are totals of 342 seats. 272 candidates out of the 342 seats are selected by direct votes. The remaining seventy seats are reserved for the religious minority groups and women where both get 60 and 10 seats respectively. Moreover, a party having 27.2 general seats would attain one seat of minority consequently. These minority seats are



assigned to the mainstream parties by their priority list which is given to the election commission of Pakistan (National Assembly of Pakistan, 2021). Similarly, in the 104-seat of the senate, only four are allocated to minorities (Mustafa, Ahmad, & Arsalan, 2021). It indicates minorities have a limited number of seats and don't share equal status in casting their votes as there is a separate electoral system. They are even deprived of taking oath as the President, Prime Minister and speaker of the National Assembly of Pakistan. A proposed bill for the constitution amendment was presented in the National Assembly in January 2014 to increase the representation of minorities in the national and provincial legislatures. However, the government rejected this proposal. The government claimed that the increase of minorities in both the houses was impossible until a new population census was conducted (Gishkori, 2014). In 2022 the Supreme Court overruled an appeal to increase seats for minorities in the National and Provincial legislatures (The Express Tribune, 2022). Contrary, Muslim seats in the senate and national assembly have been increased many times but minority seats remain the same. All such things indicate clear discrimination against minorities. Even the right of double votes has been denied which is their legal right. Most of the time political parties select those persons who do not represent their respective communities. Pakistan's government should take proper measures for minorities' participation both in national and provincial assemblies. With the consent of all the political parties of Pakistan, amendments should be made in the constitution of Pakistan to give minorities their legal basic rights which they have been denied since Pakistan's inception.

Forced marriages and Religious Conversion

“If you belong to a religious minority and you are a woman, Pakistan is not a place to be” (Salim, 2008).

Such a statement by an international organization (SUGIERO) working for minorities' rights across the world is certainly it is regrettable. Different reports reveal that the concerned institutions have failed to provide proper protection to minorities (FIDH, 2015; Human Rights Watch, 2022). Forced marriages and religious conversion have increased over the years and would keep increasing if concerned authorities and the government in particular do not recognize and respond to this issue prudently. It has become a common routine in the country that some Muslim seminaries encourage young men to convert non-Muslims to Islam. Generally, young people abduct non-Muslim girls and rape them. If however they are arrested by the law enforcement authorities, they produce a certificate issued by any Muslim seminary that the kidnapped girls had embraced Islam and they had already married the girls (Salim, 2008). Marriage laws are also a matter of concern for minorities. These laws undermine the security of non-Muslims. Minorities consider these laws as contentious. They argue that marriage laws have no legal mechanisms to recognize the marriages of minority groups (MRGI, 2014). The incidence and occurrence of forced conversion and marriage of minority women is a direct consequence of marriage laws in the country.



Facts collected by the Asian News Networks in 2006 and 2007 reveal that in Pakistan forced conversion figures reach 500 to 600 people in a year (Salim, 2008). The UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women condemned the perseverance of forced marriages and forced conversions in Pakistan. It also denounced the continued use of religious law to justify such crimes (FIDH, 2015). In Pakistan, there is no restriction on changing one's religion. However, most Muslim philosophers and scholars consider it an apostasy when someone converts from Islam to another religion, an offense punishable by death according to Islamic Sharia. Consequently, it becomes a risky option to convert from Islam to any other religion. The state has failed to control and manage the forced conversion of religious minority groups, especially women. Over and over again, the conversions are made through the course of rape and abduction. It's not only a sadistic and inhuman act but also against international rules and regulations. The role of judicial officers and law enforcement agencies in forced conversions remains questionable, especially at a time when crime has reached its alarming stage (Khaliq, 2012).

Non-Muslim men's marriage remains legal on accepting Islam. However, if a non-Muslim woman changes her religion and accepts Islam, her earlier marriage performed according to her previous religion, would be dissolved. The same case would be about children. Children born to non-Muslim women who accept Islam after marriage are considered illicit. The lone mean to validate and authenticate the marriage and children is for the husband to confess Islam. (REFWORLD, 2013).

Marginalization in the Government Sector

The Constitution of Pakistan guarantees the equality of all citizens in every aspect; however, the participation of religious minorities in the government sector is restricted. Minorities in the country are mainly limited to tedious and menial occupations. These menial works do not allow them to improve their socioeconomic conditions. There are, some members of minorities who possess some prestigious and persuasive jobs, but a glass ceiling remains and the socio-economic ladder is much more difficult to climb (MRGI, 2014). Though a five percent of job quota is reserved for religious minorities, however, these measures are not always followed. Sargodha University recently ignored this quota for minorities (Pakistan Today, 2013). According to the Global Slavery Index Pakistan is the third worst place in the world for forced labour and debt bondage. The country has done little to eradicate the mechanism of bonded labour and it remains at the same position because of the widespread and pervasive use of bonded labour across the country (The Global Slavery Index, 2013; Walk Free, 2018). Furthermore, Christians and Hindus have to take on menial work, particularly low-level sanitary jobs. A large number of Christians are occupied as street sweepers that Muslims in the country are usually reluctant to do. Such social discrimination and stigmatization reinforce minority groups' economic relegation, and affect their ability to admittance and get equal chances of employment as a result.



There are certain barriers for minorities to get a government job. Minorities have to struggle hard to achieve high qualified jobs. Minorities argue that are not allowed into the armed forces, the judiciary, or responsible positions in the civil service. These accusations and allegations are authenticated by the facts. The facts and statistics reveal an almost insignificant Hindu presence in the higher echelons of the administration, bureaucracy and armed forces. Prejudice and discrimination against the Hindus is reinforced by the religious orthodoxy, within educational institutions as well as by the state-controlled media (MRGI, 2014). The discrimination against non-Muslims is quite apparent; for example in the army, non-Muslims rarely rise above the rank of a colonel and even they are not assigned to sensitive positions. The same is the case in civil service also. Such marginalization and underprivileged status of minorities is mainly because of neglect of the state. A good example of this attitude of the state is reflected in the minority's share of government employment which does not match their numerical strength. Minority groups blame concerned institutions for such discrimination and not working sincerely to overcome these disadvantages.

Biased Media

The Pakistani media is not monolithic and one-dimensional. A majority of news sources play a responsible role in presenting minorities and minority issues. Yet, Amnesty International has listed Pakistan amongst the perilous places in the world for journalists mainly because of prevalent attacks and intimidation from militant groups. Journalists and human rights activists have often come under increased scrutiny. They also face severe restrictions on the right to freedom of expression (Amnesty International, 2014). The situation becomes more complex when reporters are focusing on minority issues. As a journalist described, 'every time a journalist speaks or highlights about minorities and their freedom, he has to face severe results' (Amnesty International, 2021). Minority groups often criticize the prejudice and partiality of media. Moreover, the mainstream electronic and print media hesitate to cover the issues of religious minorities. They also maintain that the mainstream media never assisted with their genuine miseries and sorrows. Minorities have a lot of social and political problems but the media remains either silent or biased. They are even unhappy that minorities' religious festivals are denied access to media. Most Hindus in the country have complained that their prestigious festival Holi has no coverage in the media. This is the special festival of Hindus and the government and concerned institutions must compel the mainstream media to cover the festival on a particular day. This step would bring a sense of nationality to the Hindu community in Pakistan (Khan, 2016).

The mainstream media also don't cover and highlight the miserable conditions of Temples. Sikhs and Parsis in Pakistan have also mentioned the similar behavior of mainstream media. Religious Minorities groups have requested the government and concerned institutions many a time to make a proper policy for highlighting minorities' problems on print and electronic media. There should be a specialist and adept editor and reporter for the coverage of minorities' problems as it has been often observed that the majority of the news related to minorities issues are published on the back



and inside pages. Minority groups stress that their issues and problems should also be published on the front page.

Civil Society, Struggle for Good Governance and Human Rights

More than sixty years have passed since Pakistan's inception yet it has not been able to build a unified society. The lack of suitable planning, illiteracy, backwardness, joblessness, poverty, social chauvinism and biased policies of our leaders have brought Pakistan to this crossroads. Many political leaders of Pakistan exploited religion for the sake of power and pushed Pakistan's society to a quagmire of radicalism, intolerance and extremism. Owing to wrong and flawed policies undemocratic traditions and culture prevailed in Pakistan. Such leaders promised to bring prosperity and social development in Pakistan but nothing happen. In all such processes minorities suffered a lot. They neither become a full citizen of Pakistan nor get equal rights as promised in the Pakistan constitution. There is a long story of their suffering and miseries. The atrocities, abduction, conversion and forced marriages have realized them that they are only second-class citizens. They believe that the state would never stand with their aspirations and there is no hope of their equal representation in all the domains of Pakistan legally and democratically. The promises of progress and development hardly became reality. The fruits of development were gathered only by those who remain close to politicians. A peaceful society, cultural traditions, acceptance, tolerance, patience and secular identity of Pakistan were crushed for the sake of Islamization.

Conclusion

The marginalization of religious minorities in Pakistan has reached its zenith. The constitutional rights promised by the Constitution have not been granted to minorities. Instead, the rising religious extremism in Pakistan has compelled minorities to converse their religion. There is a long list of attacks against Christians, Hindus and Ahmadiyya communities across the country. They have been the victim of subjugation and prejudice. Minorities have not been granted satisfactory jobs in the government sector. The attacks against religious minorities and their worship places call for urgent action to prevent the recurrence of such incidents. The state should initiate measures to curb the ever-rising extremism and radicalization in society.



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