



Violence against Religious Minorities in Pakistan

Pakistan is predominately a Muslim majority country. Its total estimated population in 2013 is 180 million, of which four percent are recognized as religious minorities, which include Christians, Hindus and others. The last official census was conducted 15 years back in 1998, and most of the policy decisions are taken on the basis of this older official data.

Pakistan and Religious Minorities: Pakistan, though created in the name of Islam, was envisioned by its founder Quaid Azam as a modern, secular and democratic state where people of different faiths and ideologies would have equal citizenship rights. However, what followed went totally against this vision. The first constituent assembly of Pakistan passed “The Objectives Resolution” on March 12, 1949 which proclaimed that the future constitution of Pakistan would not be modeled entirely on a European pattern, but on the ideology and democratic faith of Islam. Later, it was made a substantive part of the 1973 Constitution of Pakistan by a Presidential Order in 1985.

A recent study “Religious Minorities in Pakistan: Constitutional Rights & Access to Judicial System” (Zeenat Hisam, 2013) suggests that the last two decades in particular have witnessed a rising trend of discrimination, persecution and violence against religious minorities and a steady erosion of their citizenship rights in Pakistan. The level of violence and the extent of the threat to their identity, culture, religion and their life and property have reached a point where the minorities feel they have no option but to leave the land or live a life in fear, subjugation and anxiety over an impending disaster. The political, legal, socio-religious factors that have led to this unfortunate tragedy are many.

Recent wave of violence:

Religious minorities have been victims of both systematic and physical violence for a long time. This year, a Christian church was attacked with a suicide bomb in Peshawar (the capital of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province) on 21 September 2013, in which around 100 poor Christians, including children and women, were killed and scores others were injured. Other forms of violence against Christians are also on rise.

Hindus, the majority of whom reside in Southern Sindh province, are also easy targets of violence by influential Muslim landlords and political elites. Target killings, kidnappings for ransom and forced conversions of Hindu girls are on the rise. According to the “State of Human Rights Report” of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, about 3,000 Hindus have moved to India during 2012 due to violence and discrimination.

Nexus between caste, Religion and exploitation:

Religious minorities in general are facing violence and discrimination in Pakistan. The low caste Hindus (Dalits), officially known as Scheduled Castes, are the worst victims of discrimination and violence. They are in a dual disadvantageous position as they are Hindu by religion, a minority in

Muslim majority Pakistan, and also of the lower castes within the Hindu population. They are called “*achoots*”, or ‘untouchables’.

In a recent incident a mob led by a local religious cleric dredged the buried body of a scheduled caste Hindu, Bhoro Bheel, from a graveyard in Sindh province on 6 October 2013. The dragging of the body and its humiliation added to the injuries of the already marginalized and scared the scheduled castes.

Sexual violence against Scheduled Caste women and young girls is also on rise. Newspapers have published over a dozen news items about acts of sexual violence against Dalit women during the last three months alone in the province of Sindh. In many cases women were gang-raped. The irony is that hardly any culprit is caught or booked, let alone punished.

In one of the latest cases two young Dalit girls, Nellan and Kaku Kolhi, were raped by sons of a local landlord in October 2013 in Umerkot district in Sindh province.

Most Pakistani Dalits are working as agriculture workers and are in debt bondage due to their poor economic conditions. While the men are exploited as bonded workers and are victims of forced and bonded labour, the women - particularly young girls - are often sexually abused by landlords and local influential people.

This kind of exploitation of Dalits in Pakistan is taken for granted due to their low socio-economic status in society, and a general state of impunity is prevalent in the country.

Recommendations:

1. The State of Pakistan should put in place effective mechanisms to stop violence against the religious minorities including exemplary punishment to those involved in the violence and crimes against the religious minority citizens;
2. The State should remove all discriminatory laws including the Blasphemy law and ensure equal access to justice for minorities groups;
3. Caste discrimination should be declared a crime and those found guilty should be punished;
4. Effective measures should be taken to bring the sexual exploitation of Dalit women to an end;
5. The government should form a high level commission to look into the issues faced by minorities, especially by the Scheduled Castes, and form recommendations for redress;
6. The government should ensure implementation of quotas in government jobs for minorities especially for Scheduled Castes;
7. Children of minorities should be given educational scholarships and have seats reserved for them in the government owned educational institutions;
8. The government should remove all hate material against the minorities from the school/college syllabus, which was included during General Zia’s Martial Law.