



RESEARCH PAPER

Plights of Minorities in Pakistan: A Historical Review

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PAPER INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: October 18, 2021 Accepted: December 29, 2021 Online: December 31, 2021 Keywords: Religious Minorities, Pakistan, Christians, Constitutional Rights, Discrimination, Education, Media, Religious Freedom *Corresponding Author: madiham64@yahoo.com	Religious minorities in Pakistan face a range of social, economic, educational, legal, and political challenges. Although the Constitution of Pakistan guarantees religious freedom and equal citizenship, existing studies point to a gap between constitutional provisions and their practical implementation. This study examines the major challenges faced by religious minorities, particularly Christians, in Pakistan. It focuses on state policies, the application of blasphemy laws, educational curricula, media representation, employment opportunities, and discriminatory social attitudes. The study also reviews the role of public schools, religious seminaries, print media, electronic media, and social media in shaping perceptions of minority communities. Drawing on existing literature, the study highlights concerns relating to poverty, access to education and healthcare, employment discrimination, religious insecurity, and social exclusion. It also recognises findings that indicate positive media coverage and examples of interreligious tolerance. The study concludes that constitutional guarantees alone are insufficient unless they are effectively implemented through state institutions and social practices. It emphasises the importance of examining the relationship between legal protections, institutional practices, and the everyday experiences of religious minorities in Pakistan.

Introduction

Pakistan is a Muslim-majority country with a mixture of different cultures, languages, ethnicities, religions, and sects. Different minority groups, including Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, Parsis, Buddhists, and Ahmadis, have been living here since 1947. According to the 1998 Census, 13.72% of the country's population is comprised of religious minorities. Precisely, there are 1.59% Christians, 1.6% Hindus, 0.22% Ahmadis, 0.25% Scheduled Castes and 0.07% others (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 1998). Since the beginning, Pakistan has recognized the importance of its religious minorities. The white color in the country's flag represents their existence and importance (Ambreen, 2014). The constitution of Pakistan also guarantees equal rights to them under Article 20. They have the freedom to acknowledge, practice, and promulgate the religion of their choice. Similarly, every religious denomination has the freedom to maintain, manage, and launch its institutions (Mehfooz, 2021). As a result of these provisions, religious minorities live and practice their religions freely in Pakistan. Similarly, in the constitution of Pakistan, all the citizens are equal in terms of their religious affiliation. They have the freedom to acknowledge, practice, and promulgate the religion of their choice. Similarly, every religious denomination has the freedom to maintain, manage, and launch its institutions (Mustafa, Ahmad, & Arslan, 2020; Khalid & Anwar, 2018; Mahmood & Shakh, 1992).

However, some reports and studies say that religious minorities in Pakistan are mistreated. Hostility and bigotry against them have risen in recent years. According to the

Human Rights Commission Pakistan (2011), minorities had a bad year in 2010, and the coming years will be even worse. In 2014, Pakistan was named one of the world's most hostile countries for religious minorities by the Pew Forum for 2011-2012 (Diamant, J., & Starr, K. J. 2018-PRC). Along with those problems, they are also facing insecurities and negative attitudes from Muslim citizens of Pakistan. Some scholars have claimed that the state policies, the judicial system, the education system, and the whole social stream of Pakistan promote bigotry and encourage prejudicial attitudes against religious minority groups (Gregory & Valentine, 2009). Rahman, 2012 argues that there seems a contradiction between the state policy and the constitution of Pakistan and Pakistan's Policies and Practices towards Religious Minorities. He further states that the religious minorities in Pakistan are facing extreme abuses regarding basic human rights at the hands of both the state and society. He concludes that Pakistan as a state and a society has failed to give minority groups their due legal and social rights. There exists a high level of intolerance, which has led to violence against them. According to him, the impact of state policies can be seen in various administrative systems and more evidently through the judicial system and its discrimination against minorities.

In Pakistan, religious seminaries and public schools have also been thoroughly investigated to see if education encourages prejudices and discriminatory attitudes against minorities. The attitude of the majority population towards minorities is a determinant of social welfare and exclusion. Thus, in light of the available literature, the current study aimed to examine the major challenges and plights of the religious minorities in Pakistan. In Pakistan, minority groups experience poverty, lack of health facilities, injustice, and lack of education. Along with these problems, they are also facing insecurities and negative attitudes from Muslim citizens. These minority groups experience poverty, lack of health facilities, injustice, and lack of education. (Rehman. 2021).

This study employs a qualitative research design based on secondary sources to examine the challenges and predicaments of religious minorities in Pakistan, with particular attention to Christians. It adopts a documentary and literature-based approach to explore the relationship between constitutional guarantees, state policies, institutional practices, and the social experiences of minority communities. The study draws on published books, scholarly journal articles, research reports, media studies, and relevant constitutional and policy documents cited in the reviewed literature. The sources address religious freedom, employment, education, blasphemy laws, media representation, and discriminatory attitudes.

The collected material is examined through qualitative thematic analysis. The analysis is organised around key themes, including constitutional rights and state policies, legal protection, educational discrimination, media representation, socioeconomic challenges, and social attitudes towards religious minorities. The study also considers differences in the findings of existing research, including reports of prejudice as well as evidence of tolerance and positive media coverage. This approach helps identify recurring concerns and areas of disagreement in the literature. The study is limited to available secondary material and does not include interviews, surveys, or other primary field research. Its findings therefore reflect the reviewed sources and should not be treated as direct evidence of the experiences of every minority community in Pakistan.

State Policies and Minorities

The founder of Pakistan, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, had clearly said that religious minorities would be free to practice their faith and go to their worship places without any hesitation (Jinnah, 2004). The constitution of Pakistan has also ensured that minorities shall live with equal rights (Mehfooz, 2021).

Nonetheless, there seems to be a contradiction between Pakistan's state policy and its constitution. As Rahman (2012) contends minority groups in Pakistan are subjected to severe abuses of fundamental human rights by both the state and society. According to him, the impact of state policies may be seen in numerous administrative systems and, more notably, in the judicial system and its discrimination against minorities. He concludes that Pakistan as a state and society has failed to provide minority groups with the legal and social rights they deserve (Rahman, T., 2012). Poza (2011) revealed that nearly 9 out of 10 Hindu women were illiterate, while the illiteracy rate for Pakistani women is 58 percent. Poza concluded that Pakistani law protects fundamental rights; nonetheless, the government has failed to provide minorities with basic education, religious freedom, and protection (Poza, R. B., 2011). Due to a lack of education, most of the low-level jobs are done by people belonging to minority groups. Their condition becomes even more devastating when they face emotional and physical abuse at the workplace (Faruqi, 2011). Islamabad Policy Research Institute (2012) pointed out that job opportunities are not equally distributed among the minority groups in Pakistan. They are not allowed to work in high ranks in government and the private sector, and only minimal blue-collar jobs are granted (Islamabad Policy Research Institute, 2021). In 2019, the government approved a 5 percent job quota for minorities in federal government services; however, the government has failed to implement it efficiently (Din, 2019). Pakistan has also been accused of promoting religious intolerance by enacting laws that encourage citizens to discriminate against minorities. Some argue that laws governing Ahmadis' religious status especially declaring them non-Muslims have influenced public attitudes toward them, making them subject to extremist violence, persecution, and rejection by many mainstream Muslims (Chaudhary, 2020; Raja, 2020; Ispahani, 2017). According to a recent report by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) (2021), the enforced anti-Ahmadis laws have worsened religious freedom. Pakistan is re-designated, in the report as a —country of particular concern,|| that has failed to protect minorities from mistreatment (Hussain, Salim, & Naveed, 2011).

Blasphemy Law and Minorities

The judiciary is one of the most important organs of any state. It can help in reducing discrimination towards minority groups (Finke et al., 2017). One of the most internationally criticized laws is the blasphemy law. Some procedural difficulties make this law controversial (Amnesty International, 2016). The application of this law has also caused a detrimental and prejudicial attitude towards religious minorities (Shaikh, 2011; Poza, 2011; Faruqi, 2011). The blasphemy law is said to have caused extrajudicial killings in the country. More than 60 people have been blamed for dozens of communal attacks against minorities that have taken place on the pretext of blasphemy (Smith, 2018). It has been also used as a means of revenge. According to some researchers, blasphemy accusations are frequently made and used to settle personal disputes with religious others (Smith, 2018; Curtis, 2016; Poza, 2011; Faruqi, 2011). Instances of misuse also exist against Muslim individuals (Ambreen, 2014-Dawn News, 2014); in fact, most individuals charged or sentenced under this law so far are Muslims (USCIRF, 2020; Din, 2019; USCIRF, 2016). However, to date, not a single individual has been executed by the court in the context of this law since its introduction (USCIRF, 2020). The legislation's goal of this law was to protect minorities rather than abuse and discriminate against them.

Education System and Minorities

The education system is the essential agent of socialization for students. It is a place where students not only learn about many educational concepts through textbooks but also get acquainted with a lot of social situations through teachers and their way of handling those situations. However, Pakistan has two education systems: modern and madrasas systems. The modern education system is based on schools and universities. The schools

are then of two kinds, Urdu medium and English medium (Raheem, 2015). The madrasas are affiliated with five different major religious schools of thought having their curricula.

Modern Education

Several studies reveal the prejudicial attitude towards religious minorities within the modern education system. The curriculum fails to satisfy the needs and rights of minority groups (Rahman, 2012; Hussain et al., 2011). Some scholars say that the curriculum of public schools is unrepresentative of the religious and cultural values of minority groups (Mehmood et al., 2014). Others say that it is biased, particularly towards Christians and Hindus and portrays them as naturally evil, violent, and agents of West and India respectively (Agenzia Fides, 2020; USCIRF, 2016). Therefore, USCIRF (2021) has recommended the US administration follow reforms in Pakistan's educational curriculum. According to Hussain et al. (2011), the teachers of public schools held prejudiced attitudes toward minorities, which has, then, been transferred to the students. Similarly, Mehmood et al. (2014) have concluded that the attitudes of public schools' teachers are biased towards minorities. Raheem (2015) found Urdu medium school students showed more prejudicial attitudes towards minority groups than English medium schools.

Ajmal et al. (2011) studied perceptions of Muslim school-going students regarding Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, and Jews in Pakistan. The results indicated that Jews and Hindus were perceived more negatively than Sikhs and Christians. The authors concluded that the justified hostility towards Israel and India has contributed to their negative image. Others claim that problems faced by minority students in public schools are primarily driven by a prejudicial curriculum that relies on glorifying militancy and violence against non-Muslims. The discriminatory treatment in public schools can often lead to forcibly eating at separate tables, especially with Christian students (Mughal, 2018; Mehmood et al., 2014). Conversely, Afzal (2015) found Muslim students and teachers reporting that they treat minorities perfectly well in Pakistan. They acknowledged that minorities are equal citizens of Pakistan. Similarly, Ajmal, Sultana, Ain, and Tahira (2011) studied perceptions of Muslim school-going students regarding Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, and Jews in Pakistan. The results indicated that Jews and Hindus were perceived more negatively than Sikhs and Christians. The Jews and the Hindus both were considered cunning, sharp, smart, and violent. They were rated alike on most counts even though these two religious groups do not have much to do with each other historically. The authors concluded that the justified hostility towards Israel has contributed to the negative image of the Jews as a people. All the negative traits are shared between the Hindus and the Jews. Surprisingly, Sikhs were not rated high in the enemy category.

In another study, Mehmood et al. (2014) investigated the condition of students from religious minority groups in educational institutes. The study revealed that problems faced by religious minority students in public schools are primarily driven by a prejudicial curriculum that relies on glorifying militancy and violence against non-Muslims. The discriminatory treatment in public schools can often lead to forcibly eating at separate tables, especially that happens with Christian students. Among many other problems, access to education is another gigantic issue faced particularly by the Hindu community. Mughal (2018) also reported a similar incident in which a Christian student was killed by his schoolfellows. He was being called *choora*, a derogatory word used for sanitary workers, and was stopped from drinking water in the glass of Muslim students.

Madrasa Education

Scholars have also pointed out the causes of hostility and prejudice towards religious minorities to be the impact of madrasas' curriculum that has a role in shaping students' attitudes against non-Muslims. The textbooks taught in madrasas portray non-Muslims as either infidels or ones who have deviated from Islam. Consequently, it

propagates negative views of minorities rather than describing them as citizens of Pakistan with equal rights and obligations (Hanif et al., 2020; Hussain et al., 2011). Raheem (2015), in his study, has found that the madrassa teachers have demonstrated some clarity about the legal status of minorities in Pakistan but were in various ways less tolerant toward them. They showed tolerance, understanding, and acceptance on the one hand but the expressions of prejudice, ignorance, and hostility on the other. He concluded that the students of madrassas held somewhat more aggressive and intolerant attitudes toward minorities than the students of English medium and Urdu medium schools. Similarly, Hanif et al. (2020) found madrassas' students to be less tolerant towards minorities than the schools' students. On the other hand, Nazi (2011) has concluded that the attitudes of the female madrassas' teachers towards minorities are not highly biased. However, prejudicial attitudes do exist but are not extreme.

Pakistani Media and Minorities

The widespread access to media makes it a powerful tool. It can rightly be used in contributing towards resolving problems of religious minorities while giving proper coverage to their religious and social issues. In Pakistan, the representation of minorities in the mainstream media is said to be very low. Only a small coverage is given to the issues of Christians and Hindus while other minority groups are almost ignored in the dominant media. Most of the coverage is not sympathetic towards them (International Media Support, 2019). However, today the media is divided into print, electronic and social media; therefore, to know the broad picture of minorities' presentation in Pakistani media, we must look at the three streams separately.

Print Media

The print media plays a tremendous role in influencing and shaping public opinion. It is a powerful tool and can rightly be used to resolve the problems of minorities while giving proper coverage to their religious and social issues. Ambreen (2014) has examined the representation of minorities in the prominent English newspapers; The Dawn, The Nation, and The News from the years 2009 to 2011. Her study revealed that the representation of minorities in those newspapers was positive and encouraging. She has concluded that the overall coverage given to minority groups in print media was objective and focused on their issues. Khan (2016) has found that English newspapers give more coverage to minority issues than the Urdu newspapers. Batool (2018) conducted a comparative study on the representation of minorities in Pakistani and Indian print media from 1990 to 2010. She discovered that the Pakistani media was silent on Pakistani Hindus while the Indian media was presenting Indian Muslims negatively. On the other hand, Khoso (2015) studied national and international newspapers on the incident where three Ahmadis were attacked in Pakistan. He concluded that the national newspapers reported the incident sensibly and did not cross the legal boundaries; in contrast, international newspapers misguided the incident and represented the law of Pakistan against the Ahmadis. The print media is positive towards minorities and covers most of the news regarding them; that is why it has been called the most minorities conscious media in Pakistan (Alam et al., 2018).

Electronic Media

Public opinion is directly associated with the electronic media's agenda that leading news channels set in the presentation of issues. The media must follow the media ethics that are beneficial for them and the development of society. In their qualitative study, Joshua and Zia (2020) explored the policies of Pakistani electronic media and coverage of issues faced by Christians. They found that issues were covered occasionally but many times ignored certain crucial issues. The PEMRA strictly forbids all such news that creates hatred among the citizens. According to them, minorities' representation in entertainment

media is almost non-existent, whereas minority-related events are reported in the news, but they are not given the same amount of time and space as others. Shehzadi (2017) studied the performance of electronic media regarding minority issues. Her study was designed to identify the news channels' presentation of the Kot Radha Kishan|| incident where an angry mob had beaten a Christian couple over blasphemy' and later set their bodies on fire. She found that the incident was covered with an ethnic side rather than a religious one. During her survey, almost half of the people agreed that news channels create conflict between Muslims and minorities. Bushra (2011) maintains that when the Ahmadis' mosques were targeted simultaneously in Lahore on 28 May 2010, all the TV channels reported them live and talked about the issues for hours. Mubeen and Qusien (2017) have concluded that private TV channels objectively cover the minorities' issues, and create awareness regarding their rights. However, Chaudhry (2019) reports a study that claims that almost all news coverage about minorities is conservative or event-related. In that study, the radio channels are said to have not aired a single story of minorities. A very similar conclusion is made by Alam et al. (2018) regarding radio channels.

Social Media

In today's world, social media has also become a powerful tool. It can help spread the news to every corner of the world. As the use of it grows, its negative impact also grows up. People do not hesitate to post hate speech on social media which has also emerged as a major topic of debate among media scholars (Muzaffar, et., al., 2019; Costello & Hawdon, 2018). According to some researchers, social media is the primary source of religious hatred in Pakistan. It is allegedly used as a weapon against minorities and the stories relating to religious intolerance are not censored. They propose that it be regulated to prevent incorrect information about minority groups from spreading (Anthony & Hussain, 2018; Tanveer, 2016). A poll of 559 Pakistani internet users found that 92 percent have encountered hate speech on social media (Muzaffar, et., al., 2020). Specifically, 61 percent said it happened to Ahmadis, 43 percent said it happened to Hindus, and 39 percent said it happened to Christians (Haque, 2014). However, this is not true all the time; social media has also served as a valuable forum for journalists and advocates to encourage a greater understanding of minority issues. For instance, when a factory of a person belonging to the Ahmadi community was burnt over a blasphemy charge, the minority rights activists set up a campaign over social media with the hashtag "#IStand With Ahmadis.|| Many Pakistanis also showed grievances and supported Ahmadis on social media (Tamsut, 2015). Further, it has also been used to foster tolerance and raise awareness about minorities. Many activists and organizations use Twitter and Facebook as a medium for disseminating information about incidents that would otherwise go unreported in the mainstream media (Dilawar et al., 2014).

Impact of Attitudes on Religious Minorities

It is an alarming situation for any country when individuals' religious identity becomes a risk factor for mental health in a society. The attributed factors for depression among adolescents are social stressors, as the youth of minorities tend to feel that they are not given the freedom to express their religious beliefs and practices. A study reveals that minority teenagers in Pakistan are more prone to lower self-esteem as compared to Muslim teenagers (Iqbal et al., 2013). Another study (Isik et al., 2018) concludes that compared to the majority of background students, students of elementary and higher education belonging to minorities score lower grades, obtain fewer credits, are more likely to fail examinations, and are twice as likely to experience study delays. It clearly shows that the academic motivation of the students belonging to minority groups is affected by injustice and inequality. Iqbal et al. (2012) investigated the level of depression in adolescents of religious minorities in Pakistan. The minorities selected were Christian and Hindus being compared with Muslims. The study results indicated that Hindus and Christians were more vulnerable to developing depression as compared to Muslims. Similarly, Naveed et al.

(2014) carried out a study to investigate the effects of discriminatory behavior on minority groups. The people belonging to minority groups were assessed in terms of difficulties in gaining good jobs, practicing religious teachings, and performing religious obligations. They found that minorities are denied equal employment opportunities and are treated as second-class citizens, subjected to various types of discrimination, intimidation, and threats.

Religion and Discriminatory Attitudes

For a long, many theorists have tried to explore the relationship between discriminatory attitudes and religion. Some scholars have claimed that religion can play a great deal in the reduction or promotion of negative attitudes towards other groups (Brown & Baker, 2016). Similarly, Altemeyer and Hansberger (1992) are of the same view. Hunsberger and Jackson (2005) found that religion promotes a negative attitude towards non-Christians in the USA. In the same way, in Hall, Matz, and Wood's (2010) research, atheist and non-religious people were found to show lower levels of hatred attitude and discrimination against minority groups while people identifying themselves with religion had a more negative attitude towards other groups. Likewise, more religious people were also found higher in ethnic prejudice than those who were slightly religious or non-religious. Religious people, in general, were found less humanitarian than non-religious individuals. Moreover, the church attenders were found more intolerant of religious rebels such as socialists, atheists, or communists than non-attenders (Allport & Ross, 1967). Several other studies have found a positive relationship between religion and prejudicial attitudes toward certain groups (Johnson, Rowatt, & LaBouff, 2012; Whitley, 2009; Batson, Schoenrade, & Ventis, 1993).

Conversely, Clobert, Saroglou, Hwang, and Soong (2014) in their comparative study titled *East Asian Religion Tolerance-a Myth or a Reality? Empirical Investigations of Religious Prejudice in East Asian Societies* argue that religion is linked with tolerance in South Korea, Taiwan, and Japan. Their study revealed that those who strongly identified themselves with a religious institution had fewer levels of prejudice towards minority groups than those who had no or fewer affiliations with religion. The reduction in negative attitudes was equally applicable to diverse groups such as minority religious groups, ethnic groups like Africans and people with bisexual or homosexual orientations.

Similarly, Colbert and Saroglou (2013) found Christians and Buddhists in Belgium showing less prejudice towards each other. The Christians showed a relatively low level of prejudice towards the images of Buddhist monks in meditation. The Buddhists also showed tolerance, openness, and positive attitudes towards Christians. They concluded that religion had a positive effect on forming good relationships with people from interreligious groups.

Conclusion

This study examined the major challenges faced by religious minorities in Pakistan, particularly Christians, through a review of existing literature. The discussion shows that minorities experience difficulties across several areas of social and public life, including education, employment, religious freedom, legal protection, media representation, and social acceptance. Although constitutional provisions recognise religious freedom and equal citizenship, the reviewed studies identify concerns about the implementation of these guarantees and the treatment of minority communities by state institutions and society.

The literature highlights the role of state policies, the legal system, educational curricula, and social attitudes in shaping the position of religious minorities. Concerns about the application of blasphemy laws include allegations of misuse, personal disputes, and violence following accusations. Studies of public schools and religious seminaries also

report prejudicial attitudes and discriminatory practices, although some findings indicate greater tolerance and recognition of equal citizenship. Similarly, media coverage presents a mixed picture. Some studies identify limited or event-based coverage, while others report objective reporting and the use of media to raise awareness of minority rights.

The findings also point to socioeconomic challenges, including poverty, limited access to education and healthcare, unequal employment opportunities, and discrimination in workplaces. These difficulties may contribute to insecurity and social exclusion. However, the reviewed literature does not present a uniform picture of the experiences of all minority groups or institutions. Differences in research findings suggest that minority experiences vary across social settings and forms of media and education.

Thus, the study indicates that understanding the situation of religious minorities in Pakistan requires attention to both formal rights and their implementation in everyday life. Further research based on primary interviews and community-level evidence could provide a clearer understanding of how these challenges affect different minority groups, including Christians, and how experiences vary across regions and institutions.

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