

Minorities In Pakistan

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“Unhe Chiro Maat. Hindu Hai. Larr Padenge” –‘don’t ridicule him, he is a Hindu, will start fighting’. Who said this? She is a lady teacher in an English medium school at Lahore, Pakistan.

The incident was one of the most trivial types. His Muslim classmates ridiculed Samir Kumar, a student of class four. They have read in their history books that before the advent of Islam the Arabians used to worship the clay made idols considering them as the incarnation of the god almighty. They know that the Hindus worship clay made idols as the incarnation of the God. They ridiculed Samir Kumar saying, “what is the name of your god? Can a clay made idol be the god at all!”. Samir takes pride in his Hindu identity. So he got annoyed and started fighting, even physically. But when he failed to give his classmates a lesson he lodged a complaint against them to the teacher. The caution quoted at the beginning of the article was the utterances of his teacher. When Amarnath, father of Samir, came to know all about the incident became so angry that he rushed to the school to lodge a fresh complaint against the students to the same teacher. ‘Instead of students your complaint should have been against the teacher, is not that?’ -said I. Amarnath took some time to get me. When he understood the point that I raised, he admitted his mistake.

In Pakistan just a few months back the National Commission for Justice and Peace in its eighth Human Rights Monitor released its report on ‘The situation of religious minorities in Pakistan’. About hate speech in Pakistan report says, that Pakistan Television’s serial Mohammed Bin Qasim, Saheen and Tipu Sultan were clear misrepresentation of historical events to the disadvantage of non-Muslim minorities. And education policy has gone from bad to worse over the years. The syllabus does not base at democratic values and the behaviour of teachers is also discriminatory towards the non-Muslim students.

Amarnath lives with his family in Simala Street at Bibi Daman Park area, a place very close to Lahore Press Club. They are of ‘Valmiki’ community, a community in the lowest order of the Hindu caste hierarchy, well known as the sweeper community. What is the condition of these working people in Pakistan? How are they living? The National Commission for Justice and Peace said in their report, ‘non - Muslim labourers, be they domestics, factory or farm workers, are an easy target of the malice of the profit hungry employers. The human rights violation and unequal treatment as workers at times, is even worse in the government services than private sector. The existing safeguards lack implementation and there is need of more appropriate legislation. However it is no coincident that sectors having bonded labour, low wages and a lack of, or no social security also has a high concentration of minority labourers. It is so in the agriculture, brick klin factories, sanitation work, carpet weaving and domestic servitude.

However, Amarnath's family is not in sanitation work, they are in business. They produce the rubber materials used in cars and other motor vehicles. Amarnath's aged but active and enterprising father looks after the production of these items. They have involved a few more workers for that and a section of their ancestral house is being used for the production of these items. Amarnath and his three brothers have taken the responsibility of selling these items in different markets and collecting the sale value from the market on a regular basis.

For reasons of various social problems that Amarnath's father was facing in Pakistan, he decided to migrate to India in the year 1980. And came to India leaving all his properties in Bibi Daman Park area at Lahore being taken care of by his neighbours and relatives. But he could not stay in India with his family for more than two months and went back to Lahore again. He continued with the business and it is running well. How well off are these Hindu minorities in the Muslim state of Pakistan? Economically they might not be in much problem. But there are problems—social and political. The dead bodies of Valmiki community cannot be cremated in the cremation ground meant for the upper caste Hindus. The greedy promoters have by now grabbed the small tiny plot in Lahore that was marked as the cremation ground for the dead souls belonging to 'valmiki' community. Amarnath and his friends and associates are trying their best to regain the authority of their cremation ground. They are moving from pillars to post of different government departments, members of the people's representatives and other influential quarters. They are, of course being helped by a reputed local civil society organization. Earlier the religious minorities did not have the right to vote for their representatives of choice along with the members of the majority community in the national assembly of Pakistan. They used to take part in the election as voters of a reserved constituency for the minority community. And the representatives of these reserved constituencies usually had the marginal role in the affairs of the assembly, such reservation has been withdrawn and now the religious minorities have been allowed to take part in selecting their representatives along with the voters of the majority community. This change in electoral process has not helped the religious minorities as such in developing their existing socio-political situation in the country. The report of the National Commission for Justice and Peace says, 'in the political arena restoration of joint electorate improved inter-community relation visibly but the incidence of intolerant commissions was high and common'.

What is the situation now? Let's quote Amarnath, "All the 15 to 20 families in our area were from 'valmiki' community. But at present only our family is from 'valmiki' community. All others have converted to Christianity." Astonished and perplexed as I was could simply ask "— why did not they convert to Islam?" In reply Amarnath simply murmured, "How would that be..." and kept silent. His silence was more eloquent to make me understand their situation in Pakistan, what is pinching the religious minorities of Pakistan most is the 'Blasphemy Law'. More particularly a few of its sections and subsections like 295 a b c and 298. The fear psychosis of being implicated under sections and sub sections of this law always put them on tenterhooks. If there is any complaint that x or y has insulted the prophet or the Alcoran, then

the accused will be inviting death penalty under Shari'a rules. No evidence is necessary, only testimony may confirm the punishment. However, not only the religious minorities, at times the majority Muslims also become victims of this law. For settling personal agenda, grabbing property etc., people have taken legal action against their opponents under this law in a motivated way. There is resentment against the use of this law. People are criticizing, opposing. It may take time for all these resentments and opposition taking the shape of a movement.

The report of the Commission has made religious intolerance responsible for increase in number of suicidal deaths within religious minorities. It reported that, in the year 2003 number of the non-Muslims committing suicide is 24. Of which 13 are woman and 11 men. Hindus count for 19 and the Christians 5. Talking about religious freedom, freedom of expression and legal rights the report of the Commission says that 'with Hudood Ordinances, Qisas and Diyayat and blasphemy laws, etc. as part of penal law and a thoroughly biased constitution of Pakistan it is difficult to imagine religious freedom available to any citizen. Moreover the religious minorities face a number of problems regarding their Personal Laws that govern matters concerning marriage, divorce, guardianship and inheritance. The Personal Laws for Muslims (and their interpretation) have overriding effect on the Personal Laws of non-Muslims. A duly solemnized marriage under Christian or Hindu rites ceases to have effect or value if any of the parties declares himself a Muslim. As an impact of these legalities the social problems for the religious minorities are increasing.

The way religious intolerances have crept into the minds of the Muslim majority of Pakistan can be well illustrated from an incidence that took place on 25 September last year. Nankana Sahib Gurudwara at Sheikhpura in Punjab is a sanctum sanctorum to the Sikh community. It is well known as a symbol of Muslim-Sikh fraternity and solidarity since last 500 years. In 1994, the foundation stone of 'Nankana Sahib Foundation' was laid by Rai Bashir Ahmad Khan Bhatti, a member of the National Assembly and chairman of the Standing Committee on Education. Mr Bhatti is the oldest living descendent of Chaudhry Rai Bular Bhatti, a contemporary of Guru Nanak, who felt that the Guru was a divine soul. Over the last five hundred years, the Bhatti family has donated almost 11,000 acres of its land to the Sikh religious shrines in and around Nankana Sahib. The entire Nankana Sahib Estate consists of 16,962 acres. Most of it is leased to the farmers and residents of Nankana Sahib. Almost all the houses in Nankana Sahib are built on this property. The Nankana Sahib Estate is the property of the Nankana Sahib Gurudwara (Gurudwara Danam Asthan). It cannot be sold to anyone. About 40,000 people who live in Nankana sahib should actually be beholden to the Sikh community in Pakistan, which allows them to hold the property in perpetuity. According to reports, a committee set up by the Punjab government had recommended that the college building within Gurudwara estate be restored to the Gurudwara to house the increased number of Sikh devotees visiting from all over the world.

The committee had also specifically recommended that the college be given alternative land and building site before being evacuated. Despite that, a plot

was hatched in the city by some local elements to exploit the unannounced recommendations of the committee and take out a violent procession in the name of religion. A mob at Nankana Sahib has stoned the temple dedicated to the founder of Sikhism and created general disorder. A group of city hoodlums first attacked a local college whose land and building belongs to the Nankana Sahib Trust and declared that they would destroy it rather than give it back to the Sikhs, unfortunately, 150 boys from the college joined them, after which they stormed the Gurudwara and stoned the inner sanctum. The fact is that the college building belongs to the Gurudwara estate and was being used by the college because of the generosity of the estate. Also, no one had actually asked the college to evacuate. However, at the intervention of the state police, somehow, the worst fall-out of communal flare up was averted. But there is no doubt about that the symbol of Muslim-Sikh solidarity and fraternity, because of this incident, now stands painted black, as black as it could be. I was having an interaction with the women and girls of Amarnath's family and some other families of the locality. They all grouped in the house of Amarnath to meet a 'Hindu' from India, which I was not at all by heart. During the course of interaction I tried to feel their pulse, their problems. They did not mention about any problem that they are facing as Hindu women in their day-to-day life. Like the Muslim middle class men and women they also rear the conservative social values and hence their movements in the society, in streets and market places, like the Muslim middle class women, are very much controlled and restricted. Dresses are similar; Hindu women also walk around the places covering their face and head with dopatta. But fact remains that they are also not free from the social problems and tensions. I talked to them freely about falling in love, getting married etc., even asked them whether there can be any chance of falling in love with a Muslim boy and getting married to him subsequently. In chorus they denounced the proposition and informed me that the marriage is decided and settled by the family. A few of them even dream of getting married to a Hindu family in India. The report of the Commission mentions that 'the Pakistani society which still has to recognize women as a full human being is prone to multifaceted crimes against women. Women belonging to minorities despite their emancipative role unfortunately face a double jeopardy, leading to gender specific injustices'. I was there with the Amarnath's family for about two hours. I came to know about many things, which I did not know earlier. As we do not see Muslim families in Amritsar in India like way, Hindu or Sikh families in Lahore are also very few in number. Most of them are from lower castes. The upper castes never bother for them. However in Sialkot, Multan and Bhawalpur district of Punjab and in Sindh province there are many more Hindu and Sikh families. But the Hindutva of these Hindus is more prominent. To save the religion they have formed an organization called 'Hindu Jagorani Samity' (the association for awakening of Hindus). In form and shape this organization resembles to old 'Hindu Mahasabha' of India. Enthusiastically they look forward to 'revival' of Hinduism in India. Amarnath is an active member of this organization. When I took leave from the family Amarnath escorted me to my vehicle. He took my palms in his hands and requested me plaintively to transmit his message to the Hindus of India that, "The caste division is the greatest obstacle for Hindutva's revival. The Hindus of India must give it up immediately". ✍️ ✍️