

IN THE NAME OF GOD

Plight of Minorities in Pakistan

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NOT A DAY PASSES WITHOUT news of bomb blasts and targeted killings, mainly of innocent civilians, by armed Islamic groups in some part of Pakistan or the other. Pakistan, many Pakistanis themselves are now forced to admit, today tethers on the brink of collapse in the face of the deadly threat that it faces from extremists in the name of Islam. The menace has led to waves of bloody attacks by armed groups of rival Islamic sects, each claiming the mantle of 'authentic Islam', against each other, in which thousands have lost their lives in recent years. Among the worst hit by the rising tide of militancy in the name of Islam are the country's religious minorities.

Although non-Muslims formed more than a quarter of Pakistan's population when the country, created in the name of Islam, came into being, their numbers rapidly depleted soon after, and now they account for only around 4 per cent of the population. Most of the country's non-Muslims, fearful of living under Muslim hegemony, migrated to India. Those few who remained behind, so a recent report reveals, live in terror on a daily basis, denied many basic rights, and treated even by the state as second-class citizens or even worse. Targets of Islamic extremists, they also suffer various forms of discrimination at the hands of the state that defines itself as Islamic, as well as routine degradation and even violence at the hands of Muslim fellow-citizens. Published by the Jinnah Institute, one of the few secular and somewhat progressive think-tanks in Pakistan, the study, titled 'A Question of Faith: A Report on the Status of Religious Minorities in Pakistan', graphically describes the harrowing plight of the country's religious minorities. The Jinnah Institute is headed by the indefatigable Sherry Rehman, former Pakistani Federal Information Minister, who was recently placed on the hit-list of Islamic extremists who have been baying for her blood for her defence of Pakistan's hapless minorities and for her criticism of the country's draconian anti-blasphemy laws that have been repeatedly used to terrorise minorities and dissenters.

The situation of non-Muslims in Pakistan, the report reads, 'has never been more dire than it is today.' Recent years, it says, have witnessed 'increased social vulnerability' of non-Muslim Pakistanis in terms of access to education, jobs and healthcare and even mounting attacks on their lives, properties and places of worship. The report highlights numerous cases of violent attacks by Islamic extremists on non-Muslim citizens, resulting in widespread loss of life and property. It accuses the Pakistani state of 'tolerance towards this persecution', labeling this as 'part of a longer-term pattern of state complicity at all levels—judicial, executive and legislative'. It argues that such state complicity is a direct consequence of Pakistan's Constitution defining its citizens on the basis of whether or not they are Muslims, with non-Muslims being legally considered, for all practical purposes, as second-class citizens.

'[T]he development of the states as an Islamic republic', the report states, 'has had an adverse effect on minority institutions and communities and their social development.' It remarks that the state's 'discriminatory legal frameworks', devised in the name of Islam, are an open abetment to Islamic extremists and even ordinary Muslim citizens to attack non-Muslims.

The state's complicity in the targeting of non-Muslims is exacerbated by its unwillingness and total failure to punish hate crimes committed against religious minorities. The report accuses the Pakistani state of continuing to 'turn a blind eye to the spread of cultures of cruelty and vigilantism' represented by Islamic extremists, who are fired by an irrepressible hatred of non-Muslims, and of enjoying 'a partisan relationship with extremist actors and agents of intolerance.'

The report cites numerous cases of violent attacks against religious and sectarian minorities across Pakistan, some directed by Islamist groups, others by Muslim mobs, in the face of which the Pakistani state has taken no action whatsoever to bring the culprits to justice, thus appearing to connive with them. In May last year, it relates, two mosques of the minority Ahmadi sect were bombed in Lahore, causing almost 90 deaths, but yet there has been no official investigation into the attacks. Nor has there been any redress for the families of the victims. In another gruesome case, Christian homes were burnt down in a Punjab town and a number of Christians charred to death by a Muslim mob, but far from the culprits being brought to book, the hapless Christians withdrew their case against the 150 alleged perpetrators. In a country where, as the report reveals, a former Minister of Religious Affairs announces on television that members of the Ahmadi sect are what he terms *wajib ul-qatal*, that is to say that it is obligatory on Muslims to kill them, what else can be expected from the agencies of the state?

Accounting for just under 2 per cent of Pakistan's population, Hindus are Pakistan's largest religious minority. More than nine-tenths of Pakistan's Hindus, the report relates, live in the Sindh province, and most of them belong to various Dalit castes. According to the report, some 80 percent of Sindhi Hindus are poverty-stricken agricultural labourers, and suffer heinous forms of both caste- and religious-discrimination. Scores of them work in slavery-like conditions as bonded labourers, mainly for Muslim landlords and brick-kiln owners. The report highlights several cases of gross violation of basic human rights of Dalits, including murders by landlords. It speaks of numerous cases of forcible conversion of Dalit women to Islam, who are married off to Muslim men against their will. Lawyers avoid taking up such cases, fearing a backlash from firebrand mullahs, who regard conversion of 'infidels' as a source of immense religious benefit. Sometimes, the police refuse to even register complaints, or the women's parents are forced to withdraw their appeals. 'Upper' caste Hindus face different forms of oppression, including routine kidnappings for massive ransoms. 'In Friday sermons at mosques in many areas of Sindh, jihad is often declared against Hindus,' the report reveals.

The report cites cases of innocent Hindus being attacked on false charges of traducing Islam. In one such case, an armed Muslim mob attacked the Hindu community in Udherpur in southern Sindh, stirred up by what was later proven to be a false charge of blaspheming Islam. While assaulting the hapless Hindus and setting fire to their shops, the crazed mob chanted, 'Hindus are infidel[s], death is their destiny!' According to local Hindus, the premeditated attack aimed at forcing the Hindus to leave Pakistan so that Muslims could grab their businesses.

'Hindus have been arrested and abused in recent years due to their religious identity. They have also been subject to violence by Muslim radicals,' the report reveals. It adds that Pakistani Hindus are often viewed as 'Indian agents' and their loyalties to Pakistan questioned even though they are the original inhabitants of Sindh. It quotes a Pakistani Hindu as pathetically lamenting, 'It is our bad luck that our Muslim friends don't accept us as Pakistanis or join us with this land. Our culture from the sub-continent is the same but the Muslims associate themselves with the Arabs.'

The report notes that Hindus routinely suffer discrimination politically and economically. Pakistani Hindus have no political party of their own—perhaps due to fear that this would antagonise Muslims, so fearful are they of publicly voicing their concerns or mobilizing for their rights in a state that defines itself as Islamic and considers Hindus to be enemies of Islam, Muslims and Pakistan. According to the report, there has been a rise in migration of Pakistani Hindus—mainly to India—in recent years. This owes principally to mounting insecurity in the face of pervasive discrimination. Voicing the anguish of many Pakistani Hindus, the report quotes a Hindu man from Umerkot, Sindh, who relates, 'Our temples are being vandalized and women raped. Atrocities against us are increasing day-by-day. We won't get permanent jobs unless we convert to Islam. In Pakistan, we are subject to persecution and have to live our daily lives in fear.'

Christians, Pakistan's second largest minority, face similar forms of oppression. Many Christians, the report reveals, 'feel that they are treated as second class citizens and discriminated against in all aspects of life...Christians across Pakistan live in a state of constant fear and insecurity.' Christians who can migrate out of the country do so, the report adds. The report cites cases of Christians being attacked by Muslim mobs, often instigated by mullahs, their churches being destroyed and being forced out of their lands, which are then occupied by their attackers. It relates instances of numerous murders of Christians in which the police have taken no action at all against perpetrators or even abet them.

Such attacks on vulnerable minorities do not seem to meet with much protest on the part of Muslim citizens, other than scattered leftist groups, probably an indication of how deeply-rooted prejudices against non-Muslims are in Pakistan. The report quotes a Christian woman whose house was destroyed by a rampaging Muslim mob: 'Not a single [Muslim] woman dared to condemn this brutality...Christians should just hear and bear whatever Muslims say to them.' In detailing the case of a church destroyed by a Muslim land-grabber, it cites another Christian, who laments, 'Muslims are unsupportive to us in every matter. They consider us people of low rank. We are not allowed to preach our religion. We do not have freedom of expression...[W]e are anxious about our existence in Pakistan.'

As with Hindus and other non-Muslim communities, Pakistan's Christians are often falsely accused by Muslims of blaspheming Islam (the punishment for which is death or life imprisonment) simply to settle personal scores or even to grab their properties. Dalit Christian labourers demanding decent wages have been targeted under this draconian law. Discrimination is faced on a day-to-day basis by Christians, even at the hands of ordinary Muslims, the report goes on. Most Pakistani Christians being Dalit converts, a large proportion of them engage in low-paid, highly

exploitative and what are considered menial jobs, and are victims of untouchability. Even well-educated Christians face routine discrimination in getting employment.

The report notes with alarm that liberal Muslims who speak out in favour of Pakistan's non-Muslims and protest against the pervasive discrimination that they are subjected to in the name of Islam have met with violent reaction from Islamic extremists. It cites the well-known case of two top Pakistani leaders, Governor of Punjab Salman Taseer and Federal Minister for Minorities Shahbaz Bhatti, being assassinated earlier this year for their defence of non-Muslims persecuted under the blasphemy laws. It also notes, with dismay, how some Muslim scholars who have dared to challenge the extremists' interpretation of their religion have had to face their ire. Recently, Javed Ahmad Ghamidi, one of the country's few well-known somewhat liberal Islamic writers, was hounded out of Pakistan into exile for denouncing the extremists, and his close associate Farooq Khan was slain for critiquing the extremists on Islamic grounds.

The report suggests numerous steps for the state to undertake to address the seemingly un-escapable slide of Pakistan into interminable religiously-inspired war that has made life for the country's hapless non-Muslims sheer hell. These include repealing the dreaded blasphemy law; outlawing religious hatred; taking effective action against attackers of minorities; removing the impunity of prayer leaders in mosques for inciting hatred on the basis of religion; regulating madrasas and mosques to prevent their use for hatred against non-Muslims; reviving the National Minorities Commission; blocking all funding to projects and areas where minorities are discriminated against; instituting employment quotas for minorities; reforming the educational curricula to promote equality and respect for diversity. And so on.

All certainly very impressive demands—which, one knows, will meet with deafening indifference from the Pakistani state, which has consistently demonstrated its hostility to its non-Muslim citizens, for that is the very logic that informs the rationale of Pakistan as a country.

The plight of Pakistan's religious minorities should not be a cause for Indians to gloat about, hatred of the religious 'other' being endemic in India as well. The place that non-Hindus occupy in the Hindutva imagination mirrors closely that of non-Muslims in the project of Islamic extremism. There seem no easy solutions at all to the minority question, not just in Pakistan but in India and elsewhere, too, as long as religion continues being understood as premised on the notion of 'true believers', backed by a partisan god, being relentlessly pitted against 'unbelieving' or 'polluted' 'others' in a war of cosmic proportions. Lamentably, that is how god-centred religions are generally understood by most of their adherents. As long as humans continue to imagine religion in this manner that inevitably leads to contempt and conflict, religious minorities, it appears—will have to suffer the consequences of the tyranny of religious majorities, blessed in the name of the god of their own imagination. □□□