

'BEYOND THE BORDER'

Dalits in the 'Land of the Pure'—Pakistan

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ON A VISIT TO SINDH, IN southern Pakistan, some years ago, I met up with a remarkably brave social activist who has spent years seeking to mobilize poverty-stricken landless labourers for their rights in this lawless, violence-wrecked province of Pakistan, self-styled 'land of the pure'—which is what the word 'Pakistan' literally means. The vast majority of them are Hindu Scheduled Castes or Dalits. Unbeknown to the world, there are more than two million Hindu Dalits in Pakistan, and my friend is one of the few social activists in that country working among them. With him I travelled to various parts of Sindh, where I saw for myself the pathetic conditions in which these hapless people barely managed to eke an existence, laboring under multiple forms of discrimination that are buttressed by custom, religion and law.

I recounted some of my impressions about the Dalits of Pakistan in my recently-released book, *Beyond the Border: An Indian in Pakistan*, but my interactions with the Pakistani Dalits I met hardly sufficed for a detailed study the enormity of the oppression that they face. Searching for published literature on the subject in Pakistan proved disappointingly elusive. Barring a slim pamphlet, I could procure little else. The status of social science research in Pakistan is dismal, to put it politely, being heavily ideologically driven by Islam. Almost no Pakistani social scientist, it seemed, had cared to study the country's most heavily oppressed religious minority. But a detailed report that I recently procured provides graphic details of the dismal conditions of these hapless people.

Appropriately titled 'Long Behind Schedule: A Study on the Plight of Scheduled Caste Hindus in Pakistan' and authored by Sindh social activist Zulifqar Shah, the report is the outcome of a detailed research project involving the Pakistan Institute of Labour Education and Research and the Thardeep Rural Development Programme, a major Sindh-based NGO. It covers several hundred Dalit households in parts of Sindh and southern Pakistani Punjab where Dalits live in sizeable numbers. The report unravels alarming forms of discrimination that Pakistan's Dalits continue to face. They are denied access to barbers and eateries run by others; often, doctors refuse to treat them or else use separate instruments while doing so for fear of being 'polluted'; and they may even be denied seats on buses. They continue to be treated as untouchables not just by the overwhelmingly numerous Muslims, but even by 'upper' caste Hindus, who still refuse them entry into their temples and organizations.

The vast majority of Pakistani Dalits, the report reveals, are illiterate—over 75% of the sample used in this study, with only 4% having passed the matriculation level. In the Thar Parker district bordering India, where almost half of Pakistan's Dalits live, the overall literacy rate for all communities, including Dalits, is a dismal 18%, and that of Dalits much lower. Few, if any, Dalit localities have schools. Since they are pathetically poor, expensive private schools are well beyond their reach, and so they have to send their children, if they can afford to do without their labour, to low-grade government schools instead. The curriculum of such schools is vociferously anti-Hindu. Hindus are described in government-prescribed texts as 'enemies' of Islam, Muslims and Pakistan. Such hatred in the name of religion plays havoc with the self-esteem of non-Muslim students, including Dalits, says the report. The school texts are based heavily on Islamic teachings, and studying the Quran and other Islamic books is compulsory for all students, including non-Muslims. This, the report says, is 'the most disturbing aspect of the curriculum', being in complete violation of international norms and even of Pakistani Constitutional provisions, which, in theory, provide for religious freedom for all communities. The intention in forcing non-Muslim students to study Islam in school might be to goad them to convert to Islam, but, the report stresses, it has only succeeded in alienating non-Muslims even further and 'at a grave cost' to national integration.

According to the report, 'In some parts of the lessons, students are motivated to take part in jihad [...] Most of the textbooks carry stories of Islamic heroes in a way that demoralizes students from religious minorities, particularly Hindu students.' Dalit students 'complain that their fellow students and teachers, while presenting these stories, taunt them.' Teachers and students subject Dalit students to additional forms of humiliation. They are forced to sit at the back of the classrooms, compelled to clean the school buildings, and, so the report reveals, routinely humiliated with corporal punishment and derogatory language, referred to by teachers and students by their caste names rather than their proper names. Other students refuse to share the same benches with them or to touch their food, considering them polluting on account of their being Hindu 'infidels', and of 'low' caste at that. There appears to be no effort, the report laments, on the part of the state to remove such anti-Dalit discrimination in the educational

system. Such discriminatory practices are apparently a major reason why many Dalit parents refuse to send their children to school, and this reinforces their illiteracy and vulnerability.

The report reveals that Dalits are among the most pathetically poor sections of Pakistani society. Almost 90% of Pakistani Dalits live in villages, concentrated in some of the most poverty-stricken parts of Pakistan, which is among the world's poorest and violent countries. Of the estimated 1.7 million bonded labourers, living in slavery-like conditions, in Sindh, the vast majority are Dalits. Despite some efforts by civil society organizations and the state, the report notes that there has been 'hardly any impact on the size and intensity of the nature of bondage'. The report accuses the Pakistani state of taking no serious efforts to implement laws it has enacted to abolish bonded labour, and also points out that a major portion of the money allocated for the Bonded Labour Fund, set up in 2002 ostensibly for the welfare of the children of released bonded labourers, most of who are Dalits, remains unused.

Muslim Landlords prefer to employ Dalits, rather than poor, 'low' caste Muslims, as labourers since, being non-Muslims, they are more docile and amenable to control and dare not protest their oppression. They are forced to work, generation after generation, for brutal landlords and owners of brick kilns, in return for a pittance, which is just about enough to survive. Wages are generally paid in the form of a share of the crop, with the landlord retaining three-fourths of it while the bonded labourer has to cough up the input costs as well. Dalit bonded labourers are often subjected to physical violence by landlords and are also forced into *begar* or unpaid work. In parts of Sindh where powerful Hindu Rajput landlords still live, Dalit labourers are subjected to no less demeaning forms of exploitation.

Dalit women bonded labourers are often sexually abused by landlords and their henchmen, the report reveals. They cannot protest, for, being pathetically poor and non-Muslim, they live in dread of the wrath of their masters, who enjoy powerful political influence. Being despised non-Muslims, the police and other Muslim officials, who are generally in league with the landlords, rarely, if ever, give them a sympathetic hearing. Moreover, they simply cannot afford the cost of instituting legal proceedings against their tormentors. Dalit women, the report highlights, are routinely abducted by Muslim men, forcibly converted to Islam, and then married off, sometimes being sold like cattle from one man to another till they find themselves on the streets. Having converted, even though often forcibly, to Islam, they cannot go back to their parents or revert back to their ancestral faith or else they might be killed for apostasy. Parents of such girls who seek to rescue them are told that the girls are no longer theirs since they have turned Muslim. The state continues to turn a blind eye, the report says, to such kidnappings and forcible conversions.

Most Pakistani Dalits own no land at all, not even the little plots on which they have built their miserable huts, and many do not even own their diminutive hovels. Hence, most work as landless labourers or else are engaged in what are considered menial occupations, such as snake-charming, scavenging, driving and cleaning. The monthly income of most Dalit workers ranges between 500 and 3000 Pakistani rupees, which is 35% less than the national minimum wage of an unskilled worker. Most Dalit respondents interviewed for the survey reported that they earned less than Muslims and 'upper' caste Hindus for the same sort of work. The report found that almost 85% of the Dalits were wholly landless, and that the rest owned only tiny bits of land. In drought-prone Thar Parker, where almost half of Pakistani Dalits live, the land they possess is largely desert and non-irrigated, forcing many to migrate elsewhere in search of low-paid employment. Although the state has taken over massive chunks of land in the area that belonged to 'upper' caste Hindus who migrated to India, it has refused to redistribute it to the poor, including the Dalits, despite repeated demands.

In terms of other social indices, too, Dalits are at the bottom of Pakistani society, the report narrates. Their extreme poverty conduces to widespread malnutrition and vulnerability to various diseases. Sanitary conditions in their localities, which are typically set up outside the village or in slums in towns for fear of their supposedly polluting presence, are woeful, but yet they possess hardly any government health facilities or even access to potable water.

Not surprisingly, the report discovered hardly any Dalits in any senior positions in government services or in the formal private sector. The lucky few who have struggled to reach such posts are subjected to various forms of discrimination, owing principally to their 'low' caste and their being non-Muslim. The report cites the tragic case of a Dalit woman who managed to earn a Bachelor's degree in Business Administration from Karachi and secured a job in a well-known teaching institution in the city. When her Muslim colleagues somehow discovered her caste and religion, she was subjected to taunts and jibes, and even insults about her parents and sexual advances. Disgusted and pained, she was forced to quit her job and return to her family. Such cases are apparently common across Pakistan, and the state does nothing at all to intervene.

Being a signatory to various international human rights agreements, it is incumbent on the Pakistani state to take effective measures to address the pathetic conditions of Pakistan's Dalits, the country's most vulnerable minority, the report insists. But, as the report illustrates, the Pakistani state has done nothing of the kind, and, instead, has actively worked to further disempower its Dalit citizens. □□□