

# State Of Religious Minorities In Pakistan And Their Concerns: A Systematic Literature Review

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## Abstract

This article provides a methodical assessment of previously conducted experimental literature on the challenges faced by religious minorities in Pakistan, a religiously diverse country. Using inclusion criteria, studies conducted between 2010 and 2021 were identified. Their findings were examined, and relevant themes for the current study were generated. Religious freedom, media, social exclusion, extremism, education, economic deprivation, and the constitution were among the topics discussed. Forced conversion of women and girls, restricted religious freedom, educational discrimination, limited employment opportunities, social exclusion, and identity-based discrimination are among the issues discussed in the literature identified and included in the paper over the last decade. In short, their lives in the country are fraught with difficulties. Implications for research, policymaking, and interventions are also presented.

**Keywords:** Religious Minority, Religious discrimination, Social Exclusion

## Introduction

Pakistan was envisioned as a progressive, democratic, and tolerant society at the time of partition. In his first speech to the constituent assembly, Pakistan's founder acknowledged that the state was intended to be pluralist and democratic, and he spoke about religious freedom (Aftab, 2015). In a landmark speech on religious tolerance, Pakistan's founder Muhammad Ali Jinnah said in August 1947: "You are free; you are free to go to your temples; you are free to go to your mosques; you are free to go to any other places of worship in the State of Pakistan. You may belong to any religion, caste, or creed; that has nothing to do with

the business of the state... We are starting with this fundamental principle: that we are all citizens and equal citizens of one state. Now, I believe we should keep that as our ideal in mind, and you will notice that over time, Hindus will cease to be Hindus and Muslims will cease to be Muslims, not in the religious sense, because that is the personal faith of each individual, but in the political sense as citizens of the state (Allana, 1969)." .

Unfortunately, his dream of Pakistan being a secular state was not realized. Soon after his death, the first prime minister of the newly established country, in his famous March 12 1949 speech, declared that the

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creation of the country was only half of the work done, while the other half would be done by making it a 'laboratory' of Islam (Bangash, 2016). Pakistan's trajectory after independence has been very different. At the time of partition in 1947, almost 23 percent of Pakistan's population was comprised of non-Muslim citizens. Today, the proportion of non-Muslims has declined to approximately 3 percent.

Religious minorities of the country soon grasped the fact that new born state's energies will be focused towards development and safety of the welfare of the overwhelming majority with the adoption of Objective Resolution in 1949 (Bangash, 2016). This biased approach towards religious minorities became part of all three constitutions i.e. 1956, 1962 and 1973 - of the country. Non-Muslims were prohibited from assuming president office (Article 32(2) of 1956 constitution; Article 10(A) of 1962 constitution; 41(2) of 1973 constitution). Article 91(3) of the constitution of 1973 banned the members of religious minorities from becoming the prime minister of the country. Additionally Objective Resolution, which feasted the hopelessness among religious minorities, was included in preface of the constitution. It further paved the way for discrimination and relegation of the religious minorities in the country. Islamization strategy of the state by the military ruler (Gen Zia-Ul-Haq) of the country from 1977-1988 further augmented the glitches of the religious minorities. Regarding blasphemy he introduced several provisions in the Pakistan Penal Code including 295C. These legal amendments have made it very difficult for religious minorities to live peacefully and paved the way for discriminatory attitude towards minorities

(Ispahani, 2017). Pakistan has inclined to its existing condition of religious prejudice though a succession of political decisions by Jinnah's descendants (Ispahani, 1999). The religious minority groups in Pakistan are living in an antagonistic milieu (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2020). They are, 'woefully small and powerless' (Raina, 2014), and have been facing a continuous sense of terror (Zaidi, 1988). Religious minorities residing in Pakistan are facing certain problems in their social and political lives (Shamsi, 2011). The constitution of Pakistan ensures the religious rights and it safeguards social protection of minorities, it guarantees basic fundamental rights to all citizens of Pakistan, but situation for many religious minorities has worsened over the past few decades, are disenfranchised and are not fully involved in the political life of Pakistan (Minority Right Group, 2020). Some scholars and local representatives of civil society highlight the plight of minorities in Pakistan. While on the other hand the public authorities in Pakistan negate such charges by asserting the liability only a myth which has no symmetry with reality.

The above debate proposes that religious minorities are confronting issues and are living in an unfriendly and hostile environment. Therefore, there is need to systematically evaluate the available literature concerning religious minorities issues to understand the scenario they are living in.

## **Material and Methods**

### **Inclusion Criteria**

Studies that dealt with issues of religious minority group(s) only between periods of

2010-2021 were included and made part of the study.

## **Overview of the studies**

### **Blasphemy Law and Minorities**

Judiciary is one of the most significant structures of any government. It can aid in dropping discrimination towards minority groups (Finke et al., 2017). One of the most internationally criticized and controversial laws in Pakistan's judiciary is the blasphemy law (Amnesty International, 2016). The said law has instigated a negative and detrimental attitude towards religious minorities (Shaikh, 2011; Poza, 2011; Faruqi, 2011). According to Smith (2018), blasphemy law has caused extrajudicial assassinations in the country. Dozens of collective attacks against minorities have taken place on the ploy of blasphemy. According to some scholars, the blasphemy allegations are often made and used to settle personal clashes with people of religious minorities (Smith, 2018; Curtis, 2016; Poza, 2011; Faruqi, 2011). The cases of misapplication of the law also exist against Muslim individuals (Ambreen, 2014-Dawn News, 2014); in fact, most individuals accused or punished under this law are so far Muslims (USCIRF, 2020; Din, 2019; USCIRF, 2016). Though, to date, since its introduction not even a single individual has been executed by the court in the milieu of this law (USCIRF, 2020).

### **Education System and Minorities**

Several studies reveal the curriculum lacks to mollify the requirements and rights of religious minority (Rahman, 2012; Hussain et al., 2011). According to Mehmood et al., (2014) curriculum of public schools does

not represent the religious and cultural values of minority groups. While according to some researchers it is prejudiced mainly towards Christian and Hindus and depicts them as naturally wicked, sinful, ferocious, and agents of West and India correspondingly (Agenzia Fides, 2020; USCIRF, 2016). Therefore, USCIRF (2021) has suggested and endorsed the US management to follow reforms in Pakistan's schools' curriculum. Teachers of public school also held biased and intolerant attitude toward minorities, which has, then, been transmitted to the students attitude (Hussain et al. 2011; Mehmood et al. 2014). Raheem (2015) also found biased attitude of government schools' students towards minority groups. Likewise, studies also indicated that Jews and Hindus were supposed to be more violent and sinful than Sikhs and Christians. The Jews and the Hindus both were considered cunning, sharp, smart, and violent (Ajmal, Sultana, Ain, and Tahira, 2011). Studies also suggest that religious minorities have low literacy rate due to biased curriculum. They further stated that textbooks comprise of the content that encourages fanaticism and ferocity against religious minorities (Yunus, Khan and Ali, 2012; Munir, 2015). Yunas khan and Ali (2012) also found the same result that religious minorities are harassed in the education sector of the country. In another study, Mehmood et al. (2014) explored that problems faced by religious minority students in public schools are mainly driven by a biased curriculum that relies on glorifying aggressiveness and ferocity against non-Muslims. Poza (2011) revealed that nearly 9 out of 10 Hindu women were illiterate, he concluded that Pakistani law protects fundamental rights; however, the

government is unsuccessful to provide minorities with basic fundamental right of education, religious freedom, and life protection. People of religious minorities face devastating emotional and physical abuse at workplaces (Faruqi, 2011).

The textbooks taught in madrassas depict non-muslims as either infidels or ones who have deviated from Islam, consequently, propagating 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 in various ways were less tolerant toward minorities students. 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 found female madrasas' teachers towards minorities less biased.

### **Pakistani Media and Minorities**

In Pakistan, the representation of minorities in the mainstream media is very low and a very small coverage is given to Christians and Hindus while other minority groups are almost overlooked in the leading media. Most of the coverage is not compassionate towards them (International Media Support, 2019). Ambreen (2014) has found the representation of minorities in the prominent English newspapers; *The Dawn*, *The Nation*, and *The News* from the years 2009 to 2011 positive and encouraging. Khan (2016) has found that due place was given to issues of minorities in English newspapers than Urdu newspapers. Batool (2018), conducted a study on the representation of minorities in Pakistani and Indian print media during the period of 1990 to 2010. She concluded that the Pakistani media was silent on religious

minorities' issues while the Indian Muslims were being presented negatively through their media. 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).

Joshua and Zia (2020) discovered that Pakistani electronic media give proper coverage of issues to Christians' issues. The PEMRA firmly prohibits all such news that generates hatred among citizens. Shehzadi (2017) studied the performance of electronic media regarding minority issues. During her survey, almost half of the people approved that news channels generate conflict between Muslims and minorities. Bushra (2011) stated that when the Ahmadi's mosques were beleaguered 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 the private TV channels objectively cover the minorities' issues, and create awareness regarding their rights. However, Chaudhry (2019) claimed 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.

Researchers also proposed Pakistani social media is said to be used as a weapon against religious minorities, they suggested that it be regulated to avoid improper and inappropriate information about minority groups (Anthony & Hussain, 2018; Tanveer, 2016). While it has also been found that social media has been used to foster tolerance and raise awareness about religious minorities. Many advocates and

organizations use Twitter and Facebook as a medium for distributing evidence about occurrences that would else go unreported in the mainstream media (Dilawar et al., 2014). Moreover, it is also suggested that social media platforms like Facebook motivate the members of religious minority groups to resolve their problems and further create awareness amongst them about their issues (Batool, Sultana & Tariq, 2021). On the other hand, it is suggested that though religious minorities issues are highlighted in the media, they are given less coverage than other issues and their representation in entertainment media particularly is almost zero (Joshua & Zia, 2020). Besides whatever coverage they get is stereotypical in nature and present religious minorities negatively (Alam, Rehmat & Jacobson, 2019). In addition to that they are negatively presented in films (Khalid & Daudpoto, 2014) and have to endure online hate speech (Rehmat & Alam, 2019). The publications of jihadi literature also increases intolerance towards members of religious minorities (Jan, 2013). Role of media is significant as far as their inclusion in the society is concerned because negative media portrayal of religious minorities is associated with their social recognition and social isolation (Ahmad, Shaikat & Saeed, 2016).

### **Religious Freedom**

Four studies (Din & Jacob, 2019; Schaflechner, 2018; Mehfooz, 2021; Tahir & Tahira, 2016) pertain to religious freedom of religious minorities in Pakistan. They suggest that though the constitution of the country provides for the right to religious freedom, this right is violated in the case of religious minority groups

(Mehfooz, 2021). Their situation in reality is different and they face various challenges as far as religious freedom is concerned (Din & Jacob, 2019). The members of the religious minority groups endure violence, attacks and hatred. Even at institutional level they are discriminated (Tahir & Tahira, 2016). Forced conversion of their women and girls is the major issue that religious minority groups are facing. Their women and girls are allegedly kidnapped, converted to Islam and married to Muslim men under pressure (Schaflechner, 2018). Five studies (Rumi, 2018; Wilson, Saeed & Rahman, 2020; Khalid and Anwar, 2018; Ispahani, 2018; Mustafa, Ahmad and Arslan, 2020) discuss the religious minority groups' rights as provided by the constitution of the country. Studies (Khalid and Anwar, 2018; Khalid and Anwar, 2018; Wilson, Saeed & Rahman, 2020) suggest that religious minorities are given a comprehensive set of religious rights in the constitution(s) of the country. However, their situation in reality is different as they, notwithstanding the acknowledgement of minority rights, continue to face problems due to their minority status (Wilson, Saeed & Rahman, 2020; Mustafa, Ahmad and Arslan, 2020). Moreover, studies (Khalid and Anwar, 2018; Wilson, Saeed & Rahman, 2020) suggest that religious minorities have contributed significantly in the development of the country.

### **Religious Extremism**

Khan (2017) concluded that religious extremism in Pakistan not only affect religious minorities but it affects Muslims as well. However, religious minority groups have been the most affected by the wave of religious extremism in the country.

### **Economic Deprivation**

Rahman, Amin and Abbas (2020) suggested that religious minorities are economically deprived and that this economic deprivation of religious minorities in the country is linked with sense of insecurity which they have developed. They further suggest that this sense of insecurity is shaped by religious, financial and professional insecurity. Therefore, government, in order to enrich the economic status of religious minorities in the country, should increase quotas for religious minorities both in employment and education sectors and should take concrete measures to curb the menace of religious extremism. In 2019, the government approved a 5 per cent job quota for minorities in federal government services; however, the government has failed to implement it efficiently (Din, 2019).

### **Social Exclusion**

Studies (Khalid & Rashid, 2019; Raina, 2019; Naveed, Munir & Saeed, 2014; Alam, 2016) suggest that religious minorities in Pakistan experience social exclusion. They are marginalized in every aspect of their lives including employment and education (Khalid & Rashid, 2019). They are labelled as 'untouchable', are restricted from participation in the mainstream society and discriminated at the hands of the society and the state. (Naveed, Munir & Saeed, 2014). They have also been experiencing political exclusion in the society (Raina, 2019). 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 discriminatory treatment in public schools can often lead to forcibly eating at separate tables, especially with Christian students (Mughal, 2018; Mehmood et al., 2014). However, not all studies present a gloomy picture. Jan, Rehman, Khattak & Khan (2019) suggest that religious minority largely and openly practice their rituals and observe festivities. The issues they face are few and of low scale. Two studies (Rumi, 2018; Ispahani, 2018) suggest that religious minorities have been facing constitutional and legal problems from the very inception of the country and these problems multiplied as the process of Islamization was accelerated. Blasphemy laws have been misused to exclude and target religious minority groups (Rumi, 2018).

### **Discussion**

The review shows that the number of research studies conducted about religious minorities is not satisfactory. Furthermore, the studies emphasis more on some specific areas and, oversee other areas. For example, religious minorities' problems with respect to media, constitution and social inclusion are well researched while the issue of extremism and economic deprivation are areas where little research is done. However, recently this trend is changing as more and more studies about religious minorities in the country are appearing. It is evident from the fact that out total 32 research studies included in the review, 27 have been conducted over the last five (2015 -2021) years. It is relevant to mention that most of research studies about religious minorities in the country are qualitative in nature. Moreover, it has emerged that some religious groups' issues have been researched more than others. Moreover, majority of the research studies

included in the systematic review are in agreement that religious minority groups in the country face issues in different spheres of life. Their religious freedom is restricted and they are portrayed stereotypically in media. Moreover, they endure discriminatory legislation, face educational discrimination, are deprived of deserved employment opportunities and are comparatively economically backward. The analysis leads to an overall understanding that religious minorities are socially excluded and are living in an impoverished state in the country.

### Conclusion

The review demonstrated that religious minority groups are discriminated and excluded in numerous fields of life and face Spartan glitches in the society. Be it media coverage, educational opportunities, legislation, employment opportunities or religious freedom, they face marginalization and discrimination everywhere. In short, their lives in the country are characterized with numerous issues. Therefore, there is dire need to take concrete measures to resolve their difficulties and complications to facilitate their contribution in the society.

### Implications of the study

The review shows that literature on the issues of religious minorities in Pakistan is concentrated in some particular areas like media and constitution. Therefore, there is need to study other aspects and issues of religious minorities in the country. Moreover, the research studies are mostly qualitative in nature leaving behind a gap for quantitative investigation of issues pertaining to religious minority groups in

the country. Furthermore, this study implicates that religious minorities are socially excluded and there is a need for a new social contract in the country based on equality, equity, self-respect and liberty. Consequently, policy makers should play their active role in developing a general agreement through participation of all stakeholders. All the relevant policy makers, stake holders and civil society is obligated to play their active role for lobbying and advocating to provide due fundamental rights to religious minorities.

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