

Situation of minorities in Pakistan

Rizwan Hussain *The Pak Times* 2-6-96

"N or should the Hindus fear that the creation of autonomous Muslim states will mean the introduction of a kind of religious rule in such states", were the words of Dr. Allama Iqbal when he delivered his famous 1930's address. At next decisive step in South Asian Muslims' struggle for an independent homeland was Lahore resolution of 1940 (renamed as Pakistan resolution). It said, "that adequate, effective and mandatory safeguards should be specially provided in the constitution for minorities in these units and in the regions for the protection of their religious, cultural, economic, political, administrative and other rights and interests in consultation with them".

The father of the nation, Quaid-i-Azam, while addressing the constituent assembly on August 11, 1947 also made it clear that, "no matter to what community he belongs, no matter what relations he had with you in the past, no matter what is his colour, caste or creed, he is first, second and last a citizen of this state with equal rights, privileges and obligations". Even the objective resolution adopted after the death of Quaid-i-Azam amid criticism by his close comrades retained, "Wherein shall be guaranteed fundamental rights, including equality of sta-

tus, of opportunity and before law, social, economic and political justice and freedom of thought, expression, belief, faith, worship and association, subject to law and public morality". Similarly the country's first prime minister, Liaqat Ali Khan, while addressing the United States Senate reaffirmed that we have solemnly pledged that our minorities shall enjoy full rights of citizenship.

In spite of these categorical terms of reference for the minorities social contract with the South Asian Muslim's state, what happened practically remains an odd story. Although Quaid-i-Azam had trusted a member from minorities to be the president of Legislative assembly, prior to his own election in 1947 and the same person later held the portfolio of country's first law minister, but situation started deteriorating when ideological confusions of those obscurantists started prevailing on decision making who had opposed the very creation of the separate homeland for the South Asian Muslims.

What happened to minorities later on at policy level could be well judged from the steps taken by dictatorial regimes and democratic rules. All the three full-fledged constitutions country had in 1956, 1962 and 1972 maintained that the head of the state shall be a Muslim. Islam was made a state religion in 1973's constitution, which also barred the non-Muslims to become the

prime minister. However the positive aspect of 1973's constitution remained its quest for "joint electorate" in the country.

Ziaul Haq replaced the joint electorate with the separate electorates in 1983 to push the minorities off the main stream politics. The military dictator also dropped the word, "freely" from the objective resolution's text preceding to profess and practise their religion, when it was made operative part of the constitution under Article 2-A, instead of mere preamble. During Nawaz Sharif's government a suggestion to incorporate religious column in national identity card was floated, whereas indication of religion was made necessary in the passport in 1981. It was only the first chunk of electoral reforms introduced by the third People's government that "Joint electorates" has been restored for the minorities, initially awarding them double voting right, both for their countrywide 10 seats and every single constituency in their living vicinity. The government has also tried to check abuses of blasphemy laws against minorities apart from creating a special tribunal for them.

From the words of the country's founding fathers it is clear that the motive behind the creation of Pakistan wasn't establishment of a theocratic state with clergy rule. Rather all of its policies and plans were supposed to benefit minorities. Majority out of

them profess a Christian and Parsi faith. The Parsi community has always performed a vital role in business and commerce fields, while the Christians' contributions in educational field are laudable.

Still majority of the minorities which constitute 3.32% of country's total population remain socio economically and culturally marginalized. The Islamisation of Zia regime attacked their political status. Earlier their educational institutions and in some cases their hospitals were nationalised. However now with the formation of a national commission of minorities and plans for the creation of a federal advisory council of minorities, provincial cells of minorities affairs and district minorities council, optimism has emerged on otherwise bleak scene. The global yardstick of human rights has also pushed Pakistani authorities to think more in minorities friendly manner. The government policies can only define contours of minorities social contract with the state in broader terms, but it is imperative upon the people to practically opt for pluralism in society. Pluralism is not a new idea for us. The mystical ethos of our society hold many glimpses of that. Thus we must recognise minorities contributions for Pakistani society and should explore more ways and means to enhance such contributions in future.