**A brief history of discrimination against religious minorities**

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Just to remind my readers that during the time of Objective resolution 1949, under the leadership of Liaquat Ali Khan an attempt was made for tagging non-Muslims as second-class citizens of Pakistan but Suresh Chandar Chattopadhiya opposed this resolution in the parliament. While doing so the Muslims were given free hand and minority were left helpless. This was the time when religious discrimination was initiated.

The Constitution of Pakistan guarantees fundamental rights to all citizens of Pakistan. These rights include equality of status and opportunity, social, economic and political freedoms, and freedom of expression, belief, faith, worship and association. Pakistan is also home to several religious minorities, such as Christians, Hindus, Parsis, Sikhs and somehow Kalasha. Having said that, the situation for many religious communities in Pakistan has worsened over the past few decades. Pakistani religious minorities remain disenfranchised in society and are not fully included in the political life of the country; in fact, the situation for minorities continues to worsen.

Pakistan adheres to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights UDHR, and is signatory to several international human rights treaties such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). This is the obligatory duty of as per international law, Pakistan should be enforcing the right to freedom of religious expression more dedicatedly, to ensure that minorities remain equal citizens. Unfortunately, the environment in which Pakistani religious minorities find themselves is marred by hate speech, violence and repeated invocation of blasphemy laws. These oppressions have made it increasingly difficult for people of religious minorities to live safely and fully exercise their rights to freedom of expression and belief.

Our constitution echoes Jinnah’s vision and fundamental rights as in his first address to the Constituent Assembly on 11 August 1947, special attention was given to the minorities in his words: “You are free; you are to go to your temples. You are free to go to your mosques or to any other places of worship in this State of Pakistan. You may belong to any religion or caste or creed—that has nothing to do with the business of the State?18 He further said, -Now, I think we should keep that in front of us as our ideal and you will find that in course of time Hindus would cease to be Hindus and Muslims would 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”.

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This process of religious discrimination & sectarianism was accelerated by General Zia-Ul-Haq and Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto in their regimes. They declared “Ahmadiy’s” as non-Muslims and made religion Islam as compulsory if anyone wants to hold any superior position. The massive influx of extremist influence into the society can be traced back to the 1980s, where the regime of General Zia-ul-Haq openly promoted religion as a political tool.

Presently everything is happening against the constitution of Pakistan. In today’s Pakistan, religious minorities live in fear of discrimination and persecution by violent mobs, which are rarely held accountable. They often also face discrimination and unfair treatment by state institutions. Forced conversions of Hindu and Christian girls leaves families and communities insecure and in trauma, blasphemy accusations have silenced minority groups into submission, while outright discrimination in the job market has left minorities in economically unstable cycles of uncertainty and poverty.

According to Movement for Solidary and Peace (MSP), it has been estimated that 1000 women and girls from religious minorities are abducted, forcibly converted and then married off to their abductors every year. According to reports and media, 20 or more Hindu girls are abducted every month in Pakistan. The volunteer group, Responsible for Equality and Liberty, also estimate that between 20 to 25 Hindu girls are forcibly converted every month.

Evidence provided by numerous NGOs, journalists and academics have shown that abductions and forced conversions are one of the most serious problems facing Hindu and Christian women and girls in Province Sindh. If we talk about the Province Sindh, few recent incidents were alleged adoption and forced conversion of Hindu girls were reported. Mehak and Lata Kumari were kidnapped in Jacobabad, Sormi and Shanti were kidnapped in Tharparkar, Simran went missing from Pano Akil and Parsha Kumari was kidnapped in Khairpur. This practice of forced conversions is happening on daily basis in interior Sindh but the state is quite and even not taking any concrete action on this important issue.

In Sindh, Marvi Rural Development Organization- MRDO from past several years is working for the rights of the minorities, recently with the support of Minority Rights Group International MRG, will be working protect the fundamental rights of minorities particularly female minority members as provided in the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan under Article-25. Both of the organization will work for creating awareness on minority rights and will assist these females for obtaining identity cards and for registering their marriages. MRDO will provide a platform to look into various grievances of minority communities as well as to lay down mechanisms for promotion and protection of identity of minorities at the District level.

While talking with Saira Ahmed, she said MRDO will also hold meetings with the parliamentarians for discussing about the “Sindh Minorities Rights Commission Bill” which is still pending in the cabinet.  She said MRDO is also planning to train and sensitize officials from law enforcement agencies, lawyers and elected leaders so that religious minorities could have better access to justice.

She further said, “all citizens of the country are to be treated as one. This is what the law, the constitution and basic humanity state. If we fail to protect all the men and women, girls and boys, of this country we will only convince the minorities of the country that there is nowhere for them to turn to, nothing for them to do and leave them only to watch in agony as more and more violence is inflicted on them”.

It’s my observation that peace, prosperity, brotherhood and tolerance has vanished from our lives. It is the responsibility of the majority to ensure the rights of the minority. But this process is not happening in Pakistan as Majority are Killing the Minorities. In a country where sectarian terrorism consumed thousands of lives and minorities have been forced to live in fear, Article 20 is nothing but hollow words.

Lastly I am on the view that Minorities often do not receive the protection required from state institutions and lack access to justice. The police often turn a blind eye to reports of abduction and forced conversions thereby creating impunity for perpetrators. The police will often either refuse to record a First Information Report or falsify the information, thereby denying families the chance to take their case any further.

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