



RESEARCH PAPER

Attitudes towards Religious Minorities in Pakistan: Gaps in the Literature and Future Directions

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ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this study was primarily to review and anchor the available research on the attitudes of the Muslim majority towards religious minorities in Pakistan. A summative content analysis approach was used and themes were made for analysis purposes. Restrictions were placed on the publication years of the studies and reports that deal with attitudes towards minorities in Pakistan. In this regard, the data produced from 2011 onwards was reviewed in this paper. The existing literature reveals consensus among the researchers regarding undesirable attitudes towards religious minorities in Pakistan that profoundly impact their lives. However, religion and culture-based prejudice are not explored by these studies. The present paper highlights the gaps in the existing literature, and proposes that the identified gaps, if filled, may lead to new insights in the domain.

Introduction

Pakistan is a Muslim-majority country with a diverse range of cultures, languages, ethnic groups, religions, and sects. The most recent census was conducted in 2017, and the government approved the minorities' statistics in December 2020; however, the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics website does not contain any current information on minorities. Religious minorities account up 3.72 per cent of the country's population, according to the 1998 Census. Christians make up 1.59 per cent of the population, Hindus 1.6 per cent, Ahmadis 0.22 per cent, Scheduled Castes 0.25 per cent, and others 0.07 per cent (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 1998).

Since the beginning, Pakistan has recognized importance of its religious minorities. The white color in the country's flag represents their existence and importance (Ambreen, 2014). The constitution of Pakistan also guarantees equal rights to them under Article 20. They have the freedom to acknowledge, practice, and promulgate the religion of their choice. Similarly, every religious denomination has

the freedom to maintain, manage, and launch its institutions (Mehfooz, 2021). As a result of these provisions, religious minorities live and practice their religions freely in Pakistan.

Some reports and studies, however, say that religious minorities in Pakistan are mistreated. Hostility and bigotry against them have risen in recent years. According to Human Rights Commission Pakistan (2011), minorities had a bad year in 2010, and the coming years will be even worse. In 2014, Pakistan was named one of the world's most hostile countries for religious minorities by the Pew Forum for 2011-2012 (Pew Research Center (PRC), 2014). In Pakistan, religious seminaries and public schools have also been thoroughly investigated to see if education encourages prejudices and discriminatory attitudes against minorities. The attitude of the majority population towards minorities is a determinant of social welfare and exclusion. Thus, in light of the available literature, the current study aimed to examine the majority's attitudes toward minorities in Pakistan.

Material and Methods

Over the last two decades, a plethora of literature has been produced on Pakistan's religious minorities. The dissertations, articles, and reports on minorities in Pakistan chosen for this paper were all published in 2011 and after. Thus, open-access national and international peer-reviewed journals, JSTOR, Google Scholar, Research gate, universities' websites, and organizations that advocate for the protection of religious minorities were combed through for relevant literature. Phrases such as 'attitudes towards religious minorities in Pakistan', 'discrimination of religious minorities in Pakistan', 'treatment of religious minorities in Pakistan' and similar were used to find literature.

After collecting all the relevant materials, a summative content analysis approach was applied. Thus, the literature was thoroughly examined for keywords and common themes. Seven main categories were developed at first, but to limit the domain's scope, they were narrowed down to four broad themes: state policies, blasphemy laws, the education system, and media. These themes, wherever possible, were divided into sub-themes. The results of the chosen studies were then explored concerning relevant themes or sub- themes.

Attitudes towards Religious Minorities in Pakistan

In Pakistan, the minority groups experience poverty, lack of health facilities, injustice, and lack of education. Along with these problems, they are also facing insecurities, and negative attitudes from the Muslim citizens. The present study is devised to see the broad picture of the religious minority in Pakistan to look through different spectrums.

State Policies and Minorities

The founder of Pakistan, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, had clearly said that the religious minorities would be free to practice their faith and go to their worship places without any hesitation (Jinnah, 2004). The constitution of Pakistan has also ensured that minorities shall live with equal rights (Mehfooz, 2021).

Nonetheless, there seems to be a contradiction between Pakistan's state policy and its constitution. As Rahman (2012) contends that minority groups in Pakistan are subjected to severe abuses of fundamental human rights by both the state and society. According to him, the impact of state policies may be seen in numerous administrative systems and, more notably, in the judicial system and its discrimination against minorities. He concludes that Pakistan as a state and society has failed to provide minority groups with the legal and social rights they deserve.

A survey conducted by Poza (2011) revealed that nearly 9 out of 10 Hindu women were illiterate, while the illiteracy rate for Pakistani women is 58 per cent. Poza came to the conclusion that Pakistani law protects fundamental rights; nonetheless, the government has failed to provide minorities with basic education, religious freedom, and protection. Due to lack of education, most of the low-level jobs are done by people belong to minority groups. Their condition becomes even more devastating when they face emotional and physical abuse at workplaces (Faruqi, 2011). Islamabad Policy Research Institute (2012) pointed out that job opportunities are not equally distributed among the minority groups in Pakistan. They are not allowed to work on high ranks in government and the private sector, and only minimal blue colour jobs are granted. 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).

Pakistan has also been accused of promoting religious intolerance by enacting laws that encourage citizens to discriminate against minorities. Some argue that laws governing Ahmadis' religious status especially declaring them non-Muslims have influenced public attitudes toward them, making them subject to extremist violence, persecution, and rejection by many mainstream Muslims (Chaudhary, 2020; Raja, 2020; Ispahani, 2017). According to a recent report of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) (2021), the enforced anti-Ahmadis laws have worsened religious freedom. Pakistan is re-designated, in the report as a "country of particular concern," that has failed to protect minorities from mistreatments.

Blasphemy Law and Minorities

Judiciary is one of the most important organs of any state. It can help in reducing discrimination towards minority groups (Finke et al., 2017). One of the most

internationally criticised laws is the blasphemy law. Some procedural difficulties make this law controversial (Amnesty International, 2016). The application of this law has also caused a detrimental and prejudicial attitude towards religious minorities (Shaikh, 2011; Poza, 2011; Faruqi, 2011).

The blasphemy law is said to have caused extrajudicial killings in the country. More than 60 people have been blamed for dozens of communal attacks against minorities that have taken place on the pretext of blasphemy (Smith, 2018). It has been also used as a means of revenge. According to some researcher, the blasphemy accusations are frequently made and used to settle personal disputes with religious others (Smith, 2018; Curtis, 2016; Poza, 2011; Faruqi, 2011). The instances of misuse also exist against Muslim individuals (Dawn News, 2014); in fact, most individuals charged or sentenced under this law so far are Muslims (USCIRF, 2020; Din, 2019; USCIRF, 2016). However, to date, not a single individual has been executed by the court in the context of this law since its introduction (USCIRF, 2020). The legislation's goal of this law was to protect minorities rather than abuse and discriminate against them.

Education System and Minorities

Pakistan has two education systems: modern and madrasas systems. The modern education system is based on schools and universities. The schools are then of two kinds, Urdu medium and English medium (Raheem, 2015). The madrasas are affiliated with five different major religious schools of thought having their curricula.

Modern Education

Several studies reveal the prejudicial attitude towards religious minorities within the modern education system. The curriculum lacks to satisfy the needs and rights of minority groups (Rahman, 2012; Hussain et al., 2011). Some scholars say that the curriculum of public schools is unrepresentative of the religious and cultural values of minority groups (Mehmood et al., 2014). Other say that it is biased particularly towards Christian and Hindus and portrays them as naturally evil, violent, and agents of West and India respectively (Agenzia Fides, 2020; USCIRF, 2016). Therefore, USCIRF (2021) has recommended the US administration to follow reforms in Pakistan's educational curriculum.

According to Hussain et al. (2011), the teachers of public school held prejudiced attitude toward minorities, which has, then, been transferred to the students. Similarly, Mehmood et al. (2014) have concluded that the attitudes of public schools' teachers are biased towards minorities. Raheem (2015) found Urdu medium schools' students showing more prejudicial attitudes towards minority groups than English medium schools.

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 authors concluded that the justified hostility towards Israel and India has contributed to their negative image. Other claim that problems faced by minority students in public schools are primarily driven by a prejudicial curriculum that relies on glorifying militancy and violence against non-Muslims. 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).

Conversely, Afzal (2015) found Muslim students and teachers reporting that they treat minorities perfectly well in Pakistan. They acknowledged that minorities are equal citizens of Pakistan.

Madrasa Education

Scholars have also pointed out the causes of hostility and prejudice towards religious minorities to be the impact of madrasas' curriculum that has a role in shaping students' attitudes against non-Muslims. The textbooks taught in madrassas portray non-Muslims as either infidels or ones who have deviated from Islam. Consequently, it propagates 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 madrasa teachers have demonstrated some clarity about the legal status of minorities in Pakistan but were in various ways less tolerant toward them. They showed tolerance, understanding, and acceptance on the one hand but the expressions of prejudice, ignorance, and hostility on the other. He concluded that the students of madrassas held somewhat more aggressive and intolerant attitudes towards minorities than the students of English medium and Urdu medium schools.

Similarly, Hanif et al. (2020) found madrassas' students to be less tolerant towards minorities than the schools' students. On the other hand, Naz (2011) has concluded that the attitudes of the female madrasas' teachers towards minorities are not highly biased. However, prejudicial attitudes do exist but are not extreme.

Pakistani Media and Minorities

The widespread access to media makes it a powerful tool. It can rightly be used in contributing towards resolving problems of religious minorities while giving proper coverage to their religious and social issues. In Pakistan, the representation of minorities in the mainstream media is said to be very low. Only a small coverage is given to the issues of Christians and Hindus while other minority groups are almost ignored in the dominant media. Most of the coverage is not sympathetic towards them

(International Media Support, 2019). However, today the media is divided into print, electronic and social media; therefore, to know the broad picture of minorities' presentation in Pakistani media, we must look at the three streams separately.

Print Media

The print media plays a tremendous role in influencing and shaping public opinion. It is a powerful tool and can rightly be used to resolve the problems of minorities while giving proper coverage to their religious and social issues.

Ambreen (2014) has examined the representation of minorities in the prominent English newspapers; *The Dawn*, *The Nation*, and *The News* from the years 2009 to 2011. Her study revealed that the representation of minorities in those newspapers was positive and encouraging. She has concluded that the overall coverage given to minority groups in print media was objective and focused on their issues. Khan (2016) has found the English newspapers giving more coverage to minorities' issues than the Urdu newspapers.

Batool (2018) conducted a comparative study on the representation of minorities in Pakistani and Indian print media from 1990 to 2010. She discovered that the Pakistani media was silent on Pakistani Hindus while the Indian media was presenting Indian Muslims negatively.

On the other hand, Khoso (2015) studied national and international newspapers on the incident where three Ahmadis were attacked in Pakistan. He concluded that the national newspapers reported the incident sensibly and did not cross the legal boundaries; in contrast, international newspapers misguided the incident and represented the law of Pakistan against the Ahmadis. 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).

Electronic Media

Public opinion is directly associated with the electronic media's agenda that leading news channels set in the presentation of issues. The media must follow the media ethics that is beneficial for them and the development of society.

In their qualitative study, Joshua and Zia (2020) explored the policies of Pakistani electronic media and coverage of issues faced by Christians. They found that issues were covered occasionally but many times ignored certain crucial issues. The PEMRA strictly forbids all such news that creates hatred among the citizens. According to them, minorities' representation in entertainment media is almost non-existent, whereas minority-related events are reported in the news, but they are not given the same amount of time and space as others.

Shehzadi (2017) studied the performance of electronic media regarding minority issues. Her study was designed to identify the news channels' presentation of the "Kot Radha Kishan" incident where an angry mob had beaten a Christian couple over 'blasphemy' and later set their bodies on fire. She found that the incident was covered with an ethnic side rather than a religious one. During her survey, almost half of the people agreed that news channels create conflict between Muslims and minorities.

Bushra (2011) maintains that when the Ahmadis' mosques were targeted simultaneously 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) reports a study that claims 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.

Social Media

In today's world, social media has also become a powerful tool. It can help spread the news to every corner of the world. As the use of it grows, its negative impact also grows up. People do not hesitate to post hate speech on social media that has also emerged as a major topic of debate among media scholars (Costello & Hawdon, 2018).

According to some researchers, social media is the primary source of religious hatred in Pakistan. It is allegedly used as a weapon against minorities and the stories relating to religious intolerance are not censored. They propose that it be regulated to avoid incorrect information about minority groups from spreading (Anthony & Hussain, 2018; Tanveer, 2016). A poll of 559 Pakistani internet users found that 92 per cent have encountered hate speech on social media. Specifically, 61 per cent said it happened to Ahmadis, 43 per cent said it happened to Hindus, and 39 per cent said it happened to Christians (Haque, 2014).

However, it is not true all the time; social media has also served as a valuable forum for journalists and advocates to encourage a greater understanding of minority issues. For instance, when a factory of a person belonging to the Ahmadi community was burnt over a blasphemy charge, the minority rights activists set a campaign over social media with the hash-tag "#IStandWithAhmadis." Many Pakistanis also showed grievances and supported Ahmadis on social media (Tamsut, 2015). Further, it has also been used to foster tolerance and raise awareness about minorities. Many activists and organizations use Twitter and Facebook as a medium for disseminating information about incidents that would otherwise go unreported in the mainstream media (Dilawar et al., 2014).

Impact of Attitudes on Religious Minorities

It is an alarming situation for any country when individuals' religious identity becomes a risk factor for mental health in a society. The attributed factors for depression among adolescents are social stressors, as the youth of minorities tend to feel that they are not given the freedom to express their religious beliefs and practices. A study reveals that minorities' teenagers in Pakistan are more prone to lower self-esteem as compared to Muslim teenagers (Iqbal et al., 2013). Another study (Isik et al., 2018) concludes that compared to the majority background students, the students of elementary and higher education belonging to minorities score lower grades, obtain fewer credits, are more likely to fail examinations, and are twice as likely to experience study delays. It clearly shows that the academic motivation of the students belonging to minority groups is affected by injustice and inequality.

Iqbal et al. (2012) investigated the level of depression in adolescents of religious minorities in Pakistan. The minorities selected were Christian and Hindus being compared with Muslims. The study results indicated that Hindus and Christians were more vulnerable to developing depression as compare to Muslims. Similarly, Naveed et al. (2014) carried a study to investigate the effects of discriminatory behaviour on minority groups. The people belonging to minority groups were assessed in terms of difficulties in gaining good jobs, practicing religious teachings, and performing religious obligations. They found that minorities are denied equal employment opportunities and are treated as second-class citizens, subjected to various types of discrimination, intimidation, and threats.

Gaps in the Literature and Future Directions

Previous researches have focused on the effects of a discriminatory educational system, state policy, and the role of the media in instilling prejudice toward religious minorities. However, the attitudes need to be explored at various levels. Despite the fact that the reviewed studies are systematic, they do not provide substantial insights into the impact of religiosity. Attitudes towards religious minorities can also be explored in the context of religious orientation, such as intrinsic and extrinsic (Allport & Ross, 1967), that has revealed positive attitudes towards out-groups (Höllinger, 2020) and plays a great deal in the reduction or promotion of negative attitudes towards out-groups (Brown & Baker, 2016).

Another predictor that can impact the individuals' attitudes towards minorities is the personality traits that are found to be associated with prejudice towards out-groups (Lin & Alvarez, 2020). Moreover, personal experiences of individuals (Keehn, 2015), intergroup contact (Kende et al., 2021), and other predictors may reveal a clear picture of the phenomenon.

The majority of the studies reviewed above, regarding attitudes towards minorities, are conducted in Punjab except a few. Some studies have found a positive

coexistence between minority and majority in KP province (Rahman & Akram, 2020). Therefore, ethnicity and other demographic variables should be taken into account, as some studies have found varying attitudes towards minority groups based on demographics (Anderson, 2019). Thus, the studies reviewed above, regarding attitudes, miss something important: By focusing on what kinds of attitudes are found towards religious minorities, such studies fail to perceive the effect of ethnic background on attitudes towards minorities. Thus, there is a need to fill in this gap by conducting quantitative studies.

Another crucial aspect revealed is that most of the studies have focused on all the minority groups. There is a need to study attitudes towards one specific minority group such as Ahmadi, and Hindus etcetera, as some studies have found more negative attitudes towards one religious group as compared to the other (Raheem, 2015; Ajmal et al., 2011; Hussain et al., 2011). Future social scientists may study other factors such as the impact of fundamentalism and conservatism with mediation effect of the personality traits on attitudes towards minorities.

Future researchers can also incorporate the *Ashrāfs*, the nobles, and *Ajlāfs*, the commoners (Rout, 2017) social dichotomy in their studies. The discrimination and negative attitudes towards minorities may be because of their profession and lower social status as the lower status Muslims meet similar discrimination by well off and upper strata Muslims (Trivedi, 2016). This may reveal a clear picture of cultural-based discrimination of minorities.

And most importantly, almost all these studies are largely conducted on the background of the secular state context while Pakistan is an Islamic state that shall enable Muslims to live in accordance with the teachings of Quran and Sunnah (The Constitution of Pakistan, 1973-Article 2A). Thus, the country's ideological objectives must be taken into consideration when exploring the attitudes towards minorities, especially in the case of blasphemy laws.

Though prejudice and discriminatory attitudes toward minority groups are not unique to Pakistan, they have long been a concern in many modern secular democracies. In the United States and Europe, people from minority groups experience abuse, exploitation, racism, and a variety of other forms of discrimination (Masci, 2019; Diamant & Starr, 2018). As a result, future academics may compare prejudice against minorities in these secular states to discrimination against minorities in Pakistan.

Conclusion

To conclude, it seems that the condition of minorities is pathetic in Pakistan. However, there is a dire need for more scholarly studies in this area. In the Pakistani context, school curriculum and state policies are considered the basic reasons for

negative attitudes towards minorities. However, many other factors may be involved in the attitude formation towards them. Thus, researchers of attitudes' studies must examine religion-based and cultural-based discrimination separately to reveal and rightly address the issue.

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