

Experiences of Christian Students in Public Schools of Lahore

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Abstract

Despite the Constitutional provisions of fundamental rights to all its citizens, Pakistan has been, time and again, a focus of controversy at international level for discriminating against its religious minorities. This controversy seems to have basis as reflected in media reports of violent acts of discrimination against minorities. It is also documented in gray literature compiled by various rights advocacy groups. In addition, it is investigated in limited scholarly analyses of Pakistani laws, state policies and various government interventions or lack of it. This article is an attempt to make empirical contribution to the current analysis from a human and social perspective. The article is based on an original research study which explores the Christian students' experiences in mainstream public schools in Lahore. Based on the findings of this study, it is concluded that the Christian students did experience discrimination in public schools and this discrimination is caused due to the way the state run education system is designed and implemented.

Key words: Discrimination, Religious Minority, Public schools.

Introduction

Status of minorities is a confounding issue in the modern democratic states where almost all questions relating to the citizenry are decided by an appeal to the majority principle. At the same time, however, safeguarding the rights of the minorities is also an important principle of democratic institutions. Like other parts of the world, the question of the rights of minorities has been a constant in Pakistan. Pakistan is a predominantly Muslim country with multiple ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and religious minorities. According to the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (2018), 3.7 percent of Pakistan's population comprises of minority religious communities including Christian (1.56%), Hindu (1.60), Qadiani, Scheduled castes and others. In a place as volatile as Pakistan, the neglect of minority issues can increase social vulnerability and insecurity among these groups, and therefore, need special attention.

The Constitution of Pakistan describes the country as an "Islamic Republic", however, Articles 8 to 28 deal with the fundamental rights provided to citizens of Pakistan including equality of all citizens irrespective of religion, caste, region, tribe language and gender (Article 25) with additional protections for minorities (Articles 20,21,22,36). Islam, the state religion, stands for respect and toleration for all religions and the white strip in the national flag represent minorities. Despite all these provisions, from time to time Pakistan has been a focus of controversy with regards to safeguarding the rights of its minority groups. In addition to discrimination against ethnic and religious minorities, religious extremism has been reported to be on the rise (Hussain, Salim & Naveed 2011). In this ethnically and religiously diverse

scenario, education can play a crucial role to inculcate appreciation and respect for diversity among children and to increase tolerance and cohesion in the national fabric or otherwise.

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This article is based on a research motivated by the very idea of the importance of the role of education: how and what children learn in schools deeply influence their attitude later in life including their perception and experience of and tolerance for diversity, which is vital to the development of a tolerant, peaceful and prosperous Pakistan. The research, which provides the basis for this article, explored the experiences of Christian students in public schools of Lahore. Article 22 of the Constitution of 1973 provides for the rights of religious minorities in education: “(1) No person attending any educational institution shall be required to receive religious instruction, or take part in any religious ceremony, or attend religious worship, if such instruction, ceremony or worship relates to a religion other than his own.”

Christian students’ experience of being in a mainstream public school was explored including their experiences with reference to their textbooks, teacher’s attitude, class mates’ attitude, facilities in public schools and their reaction towards any discriminatory attitudes.

This article is a contribution to fill the gap that exists in the existing Pakistani academic literature regarding voicing the minority issues by majority population as mostly such research has been in the form of gray literature, e.g. situation analysis, rapid appraisals and reports by human/minority rights advocacy groups or non-governmental organizations.

Literature review

Textbooks almost always contain dominant religious and cultural values, societal norms and national aspirations in many countries around the world. Tobin and Ybarra (2008) demonstrate in their analysis that the U.S school children are being taught the Jewish history and faith with biased Jewish concepts especially with relation to Christianity and Islam. In England and Wales, one third of state-funded schools are legally designated as having a “religious character”, and these include schools of churches of various Christian denominations, Jewish and Methodist schools. Since 1998, Muslim, Hindu and Sikh public schools have also opened, as well as number of Christian schools of no specific denomination is also on the rise (Thompson, 2015).

Outside the predominantly Christian Europe and North America, it has been documented that both Israeli and Palestinian text books present one-sided national narratives. These narratives present the other party as an enemy, record negative actions by the other party directed at one’s own community, and portray one’s own community in a positive manner and one’s own actions as peaceful and aimed at self-protection (Council of Religious Institutions of the Holy Land, 2013). Paivandi (2018) noted that the government of Iran is teaching the country’s children to discriminate against women and minorities, and to view non-Muslims with suspicion, and it represents a specific interpretation of Shi’a Islam as a basis of the state ideology.

In Pakistan, Awan (2012) noted that in 1977, when General Zia ul Haq took control he promulgated Islamization in every field of Pakistan. The same was the case with educational policy of Pakistan. So, the National Educational Policy introduced in 1979, replaced “Dinya’at” (literally meaning the knowledge about religions) with “Islamia’at” (literally meaning the study of Islam). This change was not appropriate for a state like Pakistan in which there are citizens of different religious faiths. This national educational policy was also flawed in concern with representation of minorities in curricula. Zia’s National Educational Policy was continued throughout 1990s. From 1999, in General Musharaf’s era, some changes were incorporated in the national curricula which caused revision of syllabi of various subjects in 2001-2008 period including a comprehensive curriculum reforms during 2005-2006 (Jamil, 2009).

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Despite these comprehensive reforms, Pakistani curriculum and education has been criticized for discriminatory content and practices towards minorities. Awan (2012) noted that Pakistan needs to invest more in the fields of humanities and arts and social sciences, to eradicate the ideas of extremists and hatred. Instead, Awan (2012) noted further that a closer view of syllabus of Islamia'at and Pakistan Studies reveal a hate and extremist ideology which is being imprinted in the minds of students of schools, colleges and universities.

Further, it is also noted that in the national curriculum the glorification of militant Islam is also projected. It was found on the survey of text books of three subjects (Urdu, Pakistan Studies, Islamic Studies) of Punjab Text Book Board from grade 1 to 10. In these books, out of 871 lessons, 318 were about religion, 299 were about Islam and 261 were about ethics projecting Islamic interpretation and characters. In contrast, only 100 lessons from these three subjects were purely about ethics, peace and tolerance. A small number of 29 lessons projected some non-Muslim personality in a positive way while 45 lessons did it in a negative way. There were 61 lessons that used religion with reference to peace and tolerance while 16 lessons did it in an opposite manner (Awan 2012).

Similarly, Nayyar and Salim (n.d.) found that in Pakistani school books there are biases against Hindus and Indians and other religious minorities. They conducted the study with the help of 30 educationists and education experts and found that there are many statements in textbooks which show and develop hatred against Hindus. Yvette Rosser (2003) also conducted a study about textbooks in Pakistan and claimed that in the past, social studies textbooks in Pakistan have been used to pronounce the biases that Pakistani policy makers have towards neighbouring India, and these textbook lessons attempted to instill this prejudice among children and youth, and that as a result the minds of generations of Pakistanis are lodged fragments of hatred and suspicion for India.

Further, Hussain (2011) argued that religious and cultural values and national aspirations of majority have been the focus of textbooks and values of the minority groups have been ignored. For example, the text books of Urdu published by Punjab Textbook Board up to grade 10 have 96 chapters and poems with Islamic sermons, without concerning Pakistani religious minorities and their beliefs. Hussain (2011) noted further that the subject named Ethics which was meant to fulfil the requirements of Article 22 of Pakistan Constitution 1973 for religious minorities, is still not in access of many students in many regions of the country for a variety of reasons.

The discrimination against minorities seems not limited to the textbooks. According to James (2009), a particular sense of segregation and inferiority complex has been incorporated in minorities through sermons and recitation of particular religion in public education institutions during Morning Assembly, and the presences of other religious minorities groups are not kept in mind during such practices. Hussain (2011) also found that religious activities were a part of the class room practices like recitation of Holy Quran, *Hamd*, *Naat*, discussion of the lives of prophets and telling religious moral stories. These religious activities are not compulsory for the non-Muslim students but they were still regularly attended by non –Muslim students.

It is this multidimensional experience, which goes beyond textbooks, of minority children in mainstream public schools that is the focus of our research.

Methodology

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Using survey method, primary data were collected from 100 Christian students (male and female) in public schools of Lahore. Based on a pilot, data were collected from grade 3 to grade 10 students as they could articulate their experiences with reference to their textbooks, teacher's attitude, class mates' attitude, facilities available for them in public schools, and their reaction towards discriminatory attitude if exists. An interviewing schedule was used as a tool for data collection. In terms of selection of the universe and sample, a multistage purposive strategy was adopted. First, a list of all public secondary schools was obtained from the Lahore Secondary Education Board and the schools with the Christian community catchment areas were identified. Next, schools administration were contacted to obtain information on having any Christian students enrollment and the consent of the administration to let the researchers contact these students in the school. Christian students were informed about the research and asked to seek their parents' permission to participate in the study. Finally, all Christian students enrolled in grades 3-10, who were willing to participate in the study and had their parental/guardian consent to do so, were interviewed. Data were analyzed manually using descriptive statistics and presented in the forms of tables, conclusions were drawn from study findings and recommendations were made.

Results and Findings

Table 1.

Age of Respondents in Years

Age in years	%
8-10	11
11-13	46
14-16	42
17-19	1
Total	100

As shown in Table 1, majority of the children who participated in the study were 11 to 16 years of age, and in grades 6 to 9.

Table 2.

Respondents Studying Islamiyat and their Reasons for Studying Islamiyat

Study Islamiyat	%
Yes	89
No	11
Total	100
Reasons	%
It is a compulsory subject	38
You are compelled by school	21
You want to study	30

A good majority (89%) of these Christian students were studying the subject of Islamiyat (Table 2). When asked the reason for studying Islamiyat despite being Christian, 38% thought that it was compulsory, while 21% knew it was not but they were compelled by the school by not being offered an alternative, and 30% choosed the subject because they wanted to study it.

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Table 3.

Option of Subject in Place of Islamiyat and Subjects Offered

Option	%
Yes	24
No	76
Total	100
Subjects	%
Bible	3
Ethics	16
Christian history	3
Civics	1
Computer	1

Three fourth of all the respondents (76%) were not offered any alternative subjects in place of Islamiyat in public schools of Lahore. Out of the 24% who were offered alternative subjects, 16% were studying Ethics, and 3% each Bible and Christian History.

Table 4.

Muslim Classmates' Attitude towards Christian Students

Attitudes	%
Companionable	85
Unpleasant	6
Dominating	2
Satisfied	3
Friends behave well, others not	4
Total	100

When asked about the attitude of their Muslim classmates towards them, 85% of the Christian respondents described it as companionable, however, 6% experienced unpleasant attitude, and 4% declared that those Muslim students who are their friends behave well, others not (Table 4).

Table 5.

Christian Students Feel Different from Other Students and Reasons for Christian Students Feeling Different

Feel Different	%
Yes	46
No	54
Total	100
Reasons	%
Because of the minority status	8
Because of your Christian faith	37
Because of good behaviour	1

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Slightly more than half the respondents (54%) did not feel themselves any different from other students. Out of 46% who did, majority respondents (37%) felt different because of their Christian faith.

Table 6.

Class Teacher's Behaviour towards Christian Students and Teacher Listen to the Problems of Christian Students

Teacher's behaviour	%
Rude	1
Strict	1
Polite	84
Helpful	12
Equal	2
Total	100
Listen to the Problems	%
Just like Muslim student	34
With patience	62
Don't listen	4
Total	100

Majority of the respondents (84%) described their teacher's behavior as polite (Table 6). It should be noted that all teachers in this case were Muslim. Most of the respondents (62%) explained that their teachers listen to their problem with patience, or as they listen to other (Muslim) students.

Table 7.

Christian Students Attend Morning Assembly and Their Reason to Attend the Morning Assembly

Attend	%
Yes	97
No	3
Total	100
Reasons	%
It is compulsory for all students	78
By your own choice	17
You like to be with your friends	2

An overwhelming majority (97%) of the Christian students who participated in this research attend morning Assembly. Among those who attend, majority (78%) attend it because, according to them, it is compulsory for all students. 17%e did it by choice, though (Table 7).

Table 8.

Proceedings of the Morning Assembly

Morning Assembly is about	%
All students	41
Only Muslims	57
Not Applicable	2

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Total

100

As shown in Table 8, more than half the respondents (57%) felt that the proceedings of the Morning Assembly in their schools were meant for Muslim students only.

The overall findings reveal a sense of discrimination among Christian students attending public schools. Christian students experienced discrimination due to lack of subject options in public schools which meant that they had to study subjects like Islamiyat against their choice. Similarly, they attended Morning Assembly, where proceedings were all meant for Muslim students only, because there was no other option.

Conclusions and Discussion

The findings of this study support already existing literature on discrimination against religious minorities in Pakistan's educational curricula and system. However, what is new is the finding that this discrimination was not suffered at the hands of fellow Muslim students or teachers as most respondents described the attitude of their Muslim class mates as 'companionable, and their Muslim teachers' as 'polite' or 'as they behave with other students'. The discrimination experienced by Christian students in public schools of Lahore came from the way state run education system is designed and implemented. For example, there is a rhetoric provision of a subject 'Ethics' in place of 'Islamiyat', but, in many schools either the subject was not offered or there was no teacher to teach the subject. This was the situation in Lahore, provincial capital and a major city, and therefore, not hard to imagine the situation in smaller towns or in rural area schools where there are not sufficient numbers of teachers to teach the compulsory subjects. Similarly, as per rules, it is not compulsory for students from minority faith to attend the Morning Assembly, but, no arrangements has been made to engage these students, and therefore, either these students themselves opt to attend or the school administration compel them to attend to maintain discipline in the school.

So, while some scholars and analysts, for example, Shabir (2012) claim that in Pakistan minorities enjoy double rights, that is, on one hand they have rights as a citizen of Pakistan and on the other they have rights as a minority, it is clear that the provision of these rights is a mere rhetoric. In reality, hardly any efforts are made as shown in this study. If the state is committed to provide equal rights to all its citizens and to protect the rights of its minorities, especially in the face of increasing religious extremism, it has to make concrete efforts to translate the rhetoric of equality into reality. With its importance in shaping the society, education should be the key sector to be targeted for such efforts.

Recommendations

- The subject of ethics in place of Islamiyat may be implemented strictly as it has already been introduced as an alternative subjects for minorities as a compulsory subject.
- School Educations Department should make special efforts to appoint teachers to teach such alternative subjects. The ministry of education should ensure the quota in Christian and other minority faith teachers' recruitment to teach religiously oriented subjects offered to minority faith students.
- There should be alternative to Morning Assembly or facilities for the prayer/assembly practices for minority students, too, in public schools. As findings of this study suggest that not having an alternative meant to students (and in many cases, to school administration) that The morning assembly is compulsory for all students.

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