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EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY ON SOCIAL COHESION: A CRITICAL STUDY OF INTER-FAITH RELATIONS IN PAKISTAN

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ABSTRACT

In contemporary times, the multifaceted nature of religious diversity in Pakistan has garnered significant academic attention, prompting intense debate and rigorous analysis. The nebulous impact of this diversity on social cohesion has become an area of critical research. It stresses a closer examination of the intricate relationships between disparate religious communities in the country. It is a painstakingly conducted study and this research endeavors to shed fresh light on this complex web of inter-faith relations. This study engendered a complex and perplexing social cohesion paradigm in Pakistan. We used existing literature to explore the role of civil society, government, and religious institutions in promoting social cohesion and examine the effectiveness of their efforts to promote inter-faith harmony. The findings of our research have significant implications for policymakers, civil society, and religious institutions in Pakistan. This paper makes a valuable contribution to the literature on religious diversity and social cohesion in Pakistan, by providing new insights and evidence-based recommendations.

INTRODUCTION

Religious diversity refers to the coexistence of different religions or belief systems within a society or community (Quinn and Meeker, 2000), it is also an attitude or policy regarding the diversity of the religious belief system co-existing in society (Al-Mustafa et al., 2023). It encompasses a range of diverse religious practices, beliefs, and traditions that exist within a society or community. Religious diversity has been a salient feature of Pakistan

for decades and has attracted significant numbers of scholars in recent years. The multifaceted nature of religious diversity in Pakistan is complex and has had a nebulous bearing on social cohesion, which has become a topic of vital research (International Commission of Jurists, 2021). Pakistan is a multi-religious society with a sizeable non-Muslim population that has contributed to the country's well-being (Nayyar, 2003).

Non-Muslim made up around 23% of Pakistan's overall population in 1947, at the time of partition. Currently, the non-Muslim population has decreased to around 3.7% as a result of several obstacles such as societal and professional prejudice, intimidation, forced conversions, violence, and much more (Manchanda, 2009). According to the 2017 Census, Muslim people make up 96.28% of Pakistan's overall population. Christians constitute 1.59% of the population, with the majority residing in Punjab, Sindh, and Islamabad, the Federal Capital (Sookhdeo, 2002). Simultaneously, Hindus account for 1.60% of the population and are primarily concentrated in rural Sindh (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2017). The majority of Sikh communities now live in the Peshawar area. According to the most recent data, the estimated population of Sikhs is roughly 0.03%, with the majority of them residing in Lahore and Nankana Sahib in Punjab (Walia, 2003). Over 0.04% of Bahá' followers (founded by Baha'u'llah, 1817-1892) live in Pakistan, primarily in Karachi and Lahore (Barrett et al., 2000). There are around 20,000 Buddhists in Pakistan (United States Department of State, 2004). The few remaining Buddhists reside in the rocky portions of the NWFP's Swat and Gandhara districts, as well as Kashmir's Ladakh region (Perera, 2008). In 2004, the global Zoroastrian population was estimated to be between 124,000 and 190,000, with around 5000 living in Pakistan. Most of them live in Karachi. In recent years, Iranian refugees have strengthened Zoroastrianism's popularity (Hinnells, 2005). Following the inclusion of Ahmadis (or Ahmaddiyyas) in 1974, the number of religious minorities increased.

They were earlier identified as belonging to an Islamic religious group. Ahmadis were considered officially non-Muslim following the Second Constitutional Amendment in 1974. In Pakistan, an estimated 0.22% of the population is Ahmadi. The increasing trend of religious extremism and discrimination against religious minorities in Pakistan over the last several decades has endangered the entire foundation of Pakistani society and harmed its democracy, endangering the lives of millions of religious minorities. The fact is that the situation has worsened as a result of the Pakistani state's engaged in or has tolerated severe violations of religious freedom (USCIRF, 2011). Misra (2015) discovered that whole Christian families and communities adopt Islam to avoid institutional exclusion and overall Islamist extreme militancy. According to the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), Pakistani religious minorities face institutional, social, and legal discrimination. In Pakistan, the complex interactions between various religious communities have been a source of intense debate and in-depth investigation. Religion as an identity marker in politics proposes a link between religion, power dynamics, and national identity. Religion is an essential part of national identity and the primary source of social rituals that shape and preserve national identity (Marody & Mandes, 2005). But no policy

has harmed social integration as much as the continued religionization of the political structures. The political power of religious groups grew exponentially, enabling them to influence, and at times, even dictate the state policies as per their worldviews. While the religious lot extracted more and more space for political maneuvering, the space for minorities kept shrinking. The non-Muslim citizens were disparaged socially and disempowered politically in the scheme of things. Today, religious minorities are marginalized and subjected to persecution (Rana et al., 2021). In Pakistan, children are ‘educated into ways of thinking that make them susceptible to a violent and exclusionary worldview open to “sectarianism and religious intolerance”. These instances suggest a complex interplay between language, religion, and national identity formulations embedded in power relations (Nayyar and Salim, 2003).

The research was motivated by a need to improve and understand the complex relationships between different religious communities in Pakistan. It helped us to understand how broader social, political, and economic factors shape these relationships. It allowed for a nuanced analysis of these relationships. The study aims to address a substantial research gap by digging into the factors that contribute to social cohesion in Pakistan and the challenges faced by different religious communities in the country. The complex and multifaceted nature of religious diversity in Pakistan makes it thought-provoking to advance social cohesion in the country. Despite the numerous efforts made by civil society, government, and religious institutions to promote social cohesion these efforts have been met with varying degrees of success. Most of them were unsuccessful. This study aims to put up to ameliorate sympathy for the factors that put up to social cohesion in Pakistan. It put light on the challenges faced by different religious communities in the country. Pakistani society is generally flexible towards accepting followers of different faiths and providing them equal opportunities for a progressive and prosperous life (Khurram, 2022). This study makes a valuable contribution to the literature on religious diversity and social cohesion in Pakistan. By providing new insights and evidence-based recommendations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Religious diversity refers to the existence of various religious beliefs and practices inside a society. The impact of religious diversity on social cohesion, or the level of interconnectedness and mutual trust among members of society, can vary depending on several factors. These factors vary from one society to another. Religious diversity in Pakistan can be traced back to the Indus Valley Civilization. It flourished in the region between 2600 and 1900 BCE. The Indus Valley Civilization was a melting pot of various religious and cultural practices, with evidence of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism coexisting alongside each other. This religious pluralism continued during the Mauryan Empire (322-185 BCE). It was the era when Buddhism became the dominant religion in the region (Pandey, 2021). Islam arrived in the region in the 7th century CE. While the conversion to Islam was largely voluntary, there were instances of forced conversions during the Mughal Empire (1526-1857), when

Emperor Aurangzeb attempted to establish Islamic supremacy in the region. This led to the marginalization of Hindu and Sikh communities and strained the relationship between different religious communities in the region (Reid, 2014). The partition of India in 1947, resulted in the creation of Pakistan as a separate Muslim-majority state. It further complicated the relationship between religious communities in the region. The partition led to the displacement of millions of Hindus and Sikhs who migrated to India while Muslims migrated to Pakistan. This mass migration resulted in communal violence and bloodshed. It led to deep mistrust between religious communities in the region (Haque, 1995). The establishment of Pakistan as an Islamic state further strained the relationship between different religious communities. The Constitution of Pakistan, which was adopted in 1956 declared Islam as the state religion. It protects the rights of minorities. However, the implementation of these provisions has been inconsistent, and minority communities in Pakistan have faced discrimination and persecution (Baqir, 2023). The rise of Islamic fundamentalism in the 1980s and 1990s further worsened the situation for religious minorities in Pakistan. The promulgation of the blasphemy law in 1986, which criminalized any act that was deemed to be insulting to Islam, has been used to target religious minorities, particularly Christians and Ahmadis. The proliferation of militant groups, such as the Taliban and Lashkar-e-Taiba, has also led to a rise in sectarian violence. They extensively targeted Shia and Ahmadi communities (Rid and Hassan, 2020). Despite these challenges, there have been instances of religious harmony and social cohesion in Pakistan. One such example is the Urs festival. It is celebrated by both Muslims and Hindus in Sindh province. The festival is held in honor of the Sufi saint Lal Shahbaz Qalandar and is a testament to the syncretic culture of the region. Similarly, the Sikh community in Pakistan has been able to maintain its religious identity and has been recognized by the Pakistani government as a separate religious minority (Philippon, 2012). Religious diversity can lead to social tension and conflict (Lu and Yang, 2020). While Inter-faith relations refer to the interactions and relationships between different religious groups within a society (Veloudaki, 2023). The impact of inter-faith relations on social cohesion and political stability has been a topic of much interest in recent years, particularly in countries with diverse religious populations, such as Pakistan. When religious groups hold opposing views on social issues, such as LGBTQ+ rights or abortion, it can create deep divisions in society and lead to animosity between groups (Pew Research Center, 2014). We can see it in Pakistan. Also, this can be seen in various parts of the world. It includes India, where religious conflicts have led to violence and loss of life. Pakistan has no exception. Religious diversity can also put up to social cohesion. A study by Ringwald and Wright (2021) showed that interfaith interactions, or interactions between communities of different religions, put up lead to greater empathy and sympathy among individuals. It helps understand the views of other people from different religious backgrounds. They foster a sense of shared identity and belonging (Little et al., 2014). A study that was done in the United States found that individuals who have friends from different religious backgrounds are more likely to have positive attitudes toward other religious groups and be

involved in interfaith activities (Abrams and Houston, 2006). Religious diversity can also foster innovation and creativity. We know that different religious traditions offer unique perspectives and solutions to societal challenges. For example, the development of interfaith initiatives, such as interfaith dialogue and service projects, can promote collaboration and creativity among individuals of different religions (Abrams and Houston, 2006).

In Pakistan, the impact of religious diversity on social cohesion is a topic of significant interest and concern. The population of religious minorities varies from one province to another. There are also significant numbers of Hindus, Christians, Sikhs, and other religious minorities living in Pakistan. This diversity has contributed to both social harmony and conflict in Pakistan (Malik, 2002). The region that is nowadays Pakistan has a rich and deep religious history. It dates back off to ancient times. Before the arrival of Islam in the region, there were various indigenous religions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, and Zoroastrianism. The arrival of Islam in the 7th century AD marked a significant turning point in the region's religious landscape (Finlayson, 2020). Islam spread rapidly throughout the region. Over time, the Muslim population increased. During the British colonial period, which lasted from the mid-19th century until Pakistan's independence in 1947, the country's religious landscape continued to evolve. The British introduced new laws and policies that affected the country's religious minorities, including Hindus, Sikhs, and Christians (Teater and Jenkins (2019)). The British introduced laws that gave special privileges to Muslims and created separate electorates for different religious groups (Kooiman, 1995) These policies contributed to the development of a divided society along religious lines (Ali, 2016). After Pakistan's independence in 1947, the country's religious diversity became even more complex. The Islamic Republic of Pakistan was created as a homeland for Muslims, and its founders visualized it as a Muslim state. However, the country's religious minorities were given certain protections under the constitution, including the right to practice their religion freely. Despite these protections, religious minorities in Pakistan have faced discrimination and persecution at various times in the country's history (Bhalla, 2014). It is important to mention that Pakistan's political context has also played a significant role in shaping the country's religious landscape. Pakistan has experienced a range of political regimes. These include military dictatorships and democratic governments (Sareen and Shekhawat, 2022). Each of these regimes has had a different approach to managing the country's religious diversity (Pew Research Center, 2019). Under military dictatorships, religious minorities in Pakistan have faced significant challenges. For example, during General Zia-ul-Haq's regime in the 1980s, Islamization policies were introduced, which gave Islam a more prominent role in Pakistani society (CFR, 2011). These policies contributed to the marginalization of religious minorities and the rise of religious extremism (Minority Rights Group International, 2014). While under democratic governments, religious minorities have had greater protections and freedoms. For example, during the government of Benazir Bhutto in the 1990s, the government introduced laws that protected the rights of

religious minorities and promoted interfaith harmony (Tey, 2008). The cultural context of Pakistan has also played a function in shaping the country's religious diversity. Pakistan has a rich and diverse cultural heritage with different regions of the country having their unusual cultural traditions. These cultural traditions have contributed to the country's religious diversity as the province of Punjab is the most populous province in Pakistan. There is a significant Sikh population. Sikhs have been living in Punjab for centuries and have made significant contributions to the region's cultural heritage. Similarly, the province of Sindh is known for its rich literary and artistic traditions. There is a significant Hindu population (Chandwani, 2022). Religious diversity has also contributed to conflict and tension in Pakistan. Religious minorities in Pakistan have faced discrimination and persecution at various times in the country's history. In recent years, there have been reports of religious minorities being targeted by extremist groups which include the Taliban and other militant organizations. Notably the TTP. These conflicts have had a substantial impact on social cohesion in Pakistan. They have contributed to a sense of mistrust and division between different religious communities. This made it more difficult for these communities to work together toward park goals (Shah and Nawaz, 2021; Munshey and Zahid 2017). While literature review, we came to know that there are also examples of religious diversity contributing to social cohesion in Pakistan. For example, several interfaith organizations in Pakistan work to promote interfaith dialogue and cooperation. These organizations bring together people from different religious backgrounds and provide a space for them to engage in dialogue and work towards common goals. When we come to look at individual-level efforts we found that there are also individuals and communities working to promote interfaith harmony in Pakistan. On July 10, 2021, a harmonious cricket team was formed. The league was organized by church groups including the Catholic Diocese of Islamabad-Rawalpindi, the Zalmi Foundation, and the federal and Punjab governments. The league aims to promote interfaith harmony in society (Chaudhry, 2021). Pakistan has strict laws regarding blasphemy (Kakar, 2022). Several studies have examined the impact of inter-faith relations on social cohesion in Pakistan. These studies found that inter-faith dialogue and cooperation could play an important role in promoting social cohesion and reducing sectarianism in the country. There are also challenges to promoting inter-faith relations in Pakistan. For instance, a study by Malik (2002) found that the dominant narrative in Pakistan was one of religious homogeneity which made it difficult to promote inter-faith dialogue and cooperation. The lack of trust between different religious communities in Pakistan was a major obstacle to promoting inter-faith relations (Ahmed, 2016). Religious unity among Muslims predicts more adverse views toward non-Muslims significantly. Religious bonding is connected to the social hostilities index (SHI) at the country level, which is a measure of how people and groups in a community violate religious beliefs and practices. Muslims in Muslim-dominant nations have more religiously homogenous buddy networks than Catholics in Latin American countries with a Catholic majority (Mehfooz, 2021). The critical analysis of the previous studies explored that lack of education and lack of empathy drove young people to commit acts of violence.

The inability to manage emotions can lead an intellectually sound person to react violently to a stimulus. In Pakistan, the rising tide of violent emotionalism conjoined with exhibitionistic religiosity makes it imperative for the youth to learn to manage their emotions and avoid impulsive behaviors.

METHODOLOGY

For the collection of data related to the topic, this research selected authentic papers from different online databases. Authentic sources such as peer-reviewed journals, articles, authentic books, research papers, publications, etc. were selected for the collection of data and were accessed from online libraries such as BMC, Google Scholar, and Science Direct. 30 peer-reviewed articles were analyzed to provide a deeper understanding of the history of religious diversity and social cohesion in Pakistan which includes the study of the current state of affairs. Furthermore, papers discuss inter-faith relations, political dynamics, and economic development in Pakistan.

FINDINGS

High Level of Social Cohesion Among the Same Religious Groups

The impact of religious diversity on social cohesion in Pakistan is high. Various factors contribute to this phenomenon. Political dynamics and economic development play a significant role in shaping inter-faith relations. The effectiveness of civil society, government, and religious institutions in promoting social cohesion varies depending on their approach and actions. We found that people belonging to the same religious communities in Pakistan have a high level of social cohesion. This is attributed to a shared religious identity, cultural norms, and practices. These practices promote solidarity and support among members of the same community.

Dissatisfaction and Mistrust among Government and Religious Communities

We found that religious minorities in Pakistan are generally dissatisfied with government policies that affect their rights and status. Our study and previous literature show that religious minorities face discrimination and marginalization in various spheres of life. These include education, employment, and access to justice which has led to a feeling of exclusion and a lack of trust in government institutions among religious minorities. This dissatisfaction can lead to social tensions and hinder efforts to promote social cohesion in the country.

Strict Blasphemy Laws Are a Significant Threat to Religious Minorities

Pakistan's stringent blasphemy laws present an undeniable and pressing danger to the country's religious minorities. These laws have become a potent instrument of both hatred and retribution against these marginalized groups. In particular, they have been egregiously exploited to rationalize and perpetuate violence and discrimination against these communities,

thereby catalyzing a pervasively hostile social environment. This incendiary situation, resulting from the flagrant misapplication of blasphemy laws, invariably sows the seeds of discord and obstructs earnest attempts toward establishing social cohesion in Pakistan. The study highlights that these communities receive threats due to their beliefs, which are considered by some as unorthodox or heretical. Despite facing such challenges, the government has not taken sufficient measures to protect them from harm and discrimination. This lack of protection for these communities can undermine social cohesion and perpetuate inter-faith tensions in the country.

Internal Cohesion and External Relations

Pakistan is one of the countries with the least social cohesiveness or the most instability in society, which is mostly religious. The social indicator looks deeply into the factors of group oppression, religious intolerance, history, justice systems, and religious freedom, as well as mechanisms for reintegration, reconstruction, and compensation for victims, in post-conflict responses. Another significant feature deemed important in judging nations' socioeconomic potential is the cross-cultural or religious aspect. Socioeconomic equality and concord, including religious, sectarian, and ethnopolitical components, can be exceptionally useful predictors of long-term political stability, internal security, and economic development potential. Finally, economic, political, and social issues have a contradictory influence on a country's internal cohesiveness and determine the states' external relations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Review and Amend Blasphemy Laws: The government should review and amend blasphemy laws. It would ensure they are not used as a tool for discrimination, persecution, and violence against religious minorities. The laws should also include provisions to protect the rights of those accused of blasphemy, such as a fair trial, protection from mob violence, and an independent investigation into any allegations.

Interfaith Education Programs: The government should introduce interfaith education programs in schools and universities. It would help to promote understanding and tolerance among different religious communities. These programs should also include training for teachers to address issues related to religious diversity and social cohesion in the classroom.

There is a strong need to sensitize teachers about social peace, inclusion, and diversity as they play a key role in shaping the worldviews of the pupils. Teachers may be trained to learn skills to promote counter-narratives to violent ideologies that often make their way into educational institutions. Provisions of the Paigham-e-Pakistan that promote interfaith and intersect harmony may be taught at universities.

Addressing Socioeconomic Disparities: The government's duty to address socioeconomic disparities faced by religious minorities in Pakistan is of paramount importance, and proactive measures must be taken. This necessitates granting equal opportunities for education, employment, and healthcare. In addition, public services and resources must be allocated fairly across all communities, without regard for their religious affiliation.

Engaging Civil Society and Religious Institutions: The government needs to involve civil society organizations and religious institutions in the effort to promote social cohesion and interfaith harmony. It would be achieved through extending support for community-driven initiatives that foster tolerance, respect, and comprehension among diverse religious communities. Moreover, the government must motivate religious leaders to condemn hate speech and violence while encouraging peace and harmony through their sermons.

Protecting the Rights of Minorities: The government must undertake focused efforts aimed at safeguarding the rights of minorities. The measures should encompass providing assurances of their safety from violence and persecution, upholding their unfettered freedom to practice their religion, and redressing concerns about their participation and representation in public life.

CONCLUSIONS

There is a complex relationship between religious diversity and social cohesion in Pakistan. The results reveal that social cohesion is generally strong among people of the same religious faith. Religious minorities encounter significant hurdles, such as discrimination, persecution, and violence. This paper stresses the importance of inclusive policies and practices to tackle socioeconomic disparities and foster interfaith harmony. The suggestions we presented in this study endeavor to cultivate a society that is more accommodating and tolerant in Pakistan - a society that is rooted in principles of reciprocated respect, comprehension, and cooperation amongst all religious communities. The study emphasizes the pressing need for prompt measures to address the hardships that religious minorities confront in Pakistan and to encourage social harmony and interfaith amity in the country. Anyone living in a multi-religious society must accept and comprehend religious diversity. Understanding the religion and teachings of various religious organizations may inspire an individual to accept and appreciate other religious ideas. The freedom to practice one's religion is a basic human right that must not be denied in any community or country, whether one is Muslim or not.

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