

Hindus

Profile

The Hindu population of Pakistan makes up a small minority of about 1.96 million, or 1.2 per cent, of the total population. An overwhelming majority of the Hindus (96 per cent of the total Hindu population in Pakistan) live in rural areas of Sindh. There are heavy concentrations of Hindus in Sanghar and Tharpakar district, which borders with India. There are also small pockets of Hindus in interior Baluchistan and Punjab. The Hindus of Pakistan - residing in the interior of Sindh or Baluchistan - belong principally to the so-called untouchable class, the Scheduled Caste Hindus. Many of them are landless bonded labourers, working on the lands of big Sindhi landlords (known as Jagirdars). Those who live in towns and cities also have a menial standing and are generally employed as sweepers or *Jamadars*.

Historical context

Sindh at one time had a very sizeable Hindu population; however, at the time of partition large numbers migrated to the Indian side of the border. The partition of India in August 1947 resulted in genocidal campaigns against religious minorities, with the Hindus in Pakistan suffering most. In addition to the genocide, several million Hindus were forced to become refugees. Those who decided to stay behind in Pakistan after partition had to face constitutional limitations and social stigma. One of the country's principal and primary constitutional documents, the Objective Resolution of March 1949 makes provision for non-Muslims to freely profess and practise their religion, and this tolerant spirit is reflected in the provisions of the 1956, 1962 and the 1973 constitutions. However, despite the presence of these constitutional guarantees, the Hindu community both prior to and even after 1971 has been a continual target of suspicion and has often been treated as a fifth column. Political expediency has allowed Hindus to be treated as scapegoats for the general incompetence of governments in power.

While Islam has been used as the great rallying force for political ends, conversely, and for the same purposes, Hindus have been treated as anti-state and anti-Islamic elements, discriminated against and persecuted, arguably becoming victims of genocide during the secessionist war of 1971. Hindus generally lack equal access to education, employment and social advancement.

The tiny minority of Hindus that remains in the truncated Pakistan of today, continues to find itself vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. The constitutional amendments introduced by General Zia-ul-Haq have adversely affected the position of the Hindu minority. More significantly, the rise in religious extremism within South Asia, with periods of tense political relations between India and Pakistan, has led to greater violence and physical attacks on Hindus. Thus the Hindus of Pakistan frequently suffer from outbursts of anti-Hindu sentiments generated through a backlash of violations against the rights of Muslims in India. The Babri Masjid incident (December 1992) provides a tragic example, when anger at the demolition of the mosque in Ayodhya (India) was vented against the Hindus and their properties in Pakistan. It is estimated that between 2-8 December 1992 about 120 Hindu temples were destroyed in various parts of Pakistan. In a number of instances, gangs of frenzied men entered these temples,

smashed the idols of revered Hindu gods and goddesses, snatched the jewels that adorned them, and made off with the charity boxes containing donations. Several shops were looted or burnt, with the cost of damages running into millions of rupees. More than 500 non-Muslims, primarily Hindu families, were victimized and tortured; angry crowds entered their houses, destroyed their furniture and household goods and took away their savings and jewellery. There were also physical attacks on members of the Hindu community. A number of Hindus were killed, including a family of six who were burned to death in Loralia. Compensation for the damage to life and property has not been forthcoming.

Current issues

Members of the Hindu minority in Pakistan fear persistent harassment at the hands of religious extremists and complain that there is little official protection accorded to them. Hindu activists argue that 'secret files are kept on them and their integrity is always in question. They are not allowed into the armed forces, the judiciary or responsible positions in the civil service'. These allegations are substantiated by the facts, which reflect an almost negligible Hindu presence in the higher echelons of the administration, bureaucracy and armed forces. Discrimination and prejudice against the Hindus is reinforced by the religious orthodoxy, within educational institutions as well as by the state-controlled media. As a consequence of the oppression and discrimination, the last two decades have seen a steady exodus of Hindus from Pakistan. This exodus, however, has left behind a community that is most vulnerable and in urgent need of socio-economic protection.

A significant proportion of the Hindus within the province of Sindh are the so-called untouchables, the Scheduled Caste Hindus. As *haris* these Scheduled Caste Hindus make up part of the pool of landless bonded labour of the province of Sindh. Sindh's agricultural wealth, to a large extent, has depended on the intensive and strenuous work of bonded labour in producing hugely profitable cash crops such as sugar cane. While huge profits are made by the wealthy landlords, this landless bonded labour, consisting of substantial number of Scheduled Caste Hindus, continues to suffer from abject poverty. They remain tied to the land where they are forced to work literally as slaves. The landlords ensure that these bonded labourers and their future generations remain illiterate and unable in any way to challenge the unfair system of exploitation. The National Assembly of Pakistan abolished bonded labour through the Bonded Labour Abolition Act 1992. However, the banned practices continue to thrive in many parts of Sindh; officials remain reluctant to interfere for fear of incurring the wrath of powerful ruling families.

Hindus who do manage to break the vicious cycle of repression of bonded labour, nevertheless fail to gain any support from the general community. Existing taboos and rampant discrimination ensure that their employment prospects are confined to menial labour as *Jamadars*. Recent reports suggest increasing harassment and intimidation of women belonging to these Hindu communities. According to the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, during 1998 a number of disturbing cases came to light where Hindu women have been kidnapped, raped or forcibly converted to Islam. With overt, state-sponsored discrimination and repression, the Hindus of Pakistan remain deprived of their fundamental human rights. The Hindus are 'unwanted' and 'unwelcome' and continue to be associated with India. During the recent armed uprising in Baluchistan (2005-6) members of the small Hindu community were targeted and attacked by the Security Forces. All Hindus residing in the town of Dera Bugti were forced to take refuge either in the Sui region of Baluchistan or other provinces of Pakistan. The attacks resulted in the deaths of 33 Hindus, mostly men and young children.

As with Christians, Hindus too constantly face the issue of forced conversion. Minority groups have expressed concerns about the persecution of Hindus and threats to their places of worship. In 2007 the only Hindu temple in Lahore was demolished to make way for a commercial building.