

Teaching in a Polarized Islamic Society: A Phenomenological Study of the Christian School Teachers in the Gujrat City



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Abstract: *The Islamic Republic of Pakistan is also home to other religious minorities. Since Independence, these minorities have played a significant role in serving the nation through different professions, and teaching is one of them. Yet, there is a growing concern regarding how well and respectfully they are accommodated in a Muslim majority society. This phenomenological research study explores the perspectives of Christian teachers concerning their difficulties in dealing with students and parents of different religions and their support needs. Ten teachers were purposively selected for semi-structured interviews. Content analysis revealed that although most teachers were satisfied with working conditions and the behaviors of students and parents with them, few of them highlighted the issues of forced conversion to Islam and usage of derogatory language. Teachers also suggested that there is a need to change the mindset of the people through education, and the government should provide more opportunities to minorities.*

Key Words: Minorities, Christian Teachers, Muslims, Discrimination, Pakistan, Rights

Introduction

Pakistan came into being with the dream of realizing not only the rights of Muslims but also the rights of minorities residing within its geographical boundaries. However, the interplay of the complex social and political factors raised certain issues for minorities. In addition to confronting all the difficulties which emerge from being impoverished and powerless in Pakistan, religious minorities encounter additional difficulties and insecurities which arise specifically from their minority status and religious differences. Among religious minorities, Christianity is the second religion in Pakistan after the Muslim majority. Keeping in sight the present scenario, this research study is an effort to explore the viewpoints of Christian teachers about the perspectives of Christian teachers concerning their difficulties in dealing with students and parents of different religions and their support needs.

Bigotry against religious factions is as primaevael as recorded history, and religious subgroups are not

barred from this fact. Religious minorities consist of groups that are eager to preserve their culture, which includes their language, religion, customs, or traditions within the state ([Naveed, Munir, & Saeed, 2014](#)). Issues of religious freedom, hostility, and aggression are deeply rooted in the History of South Asia ([Curtis, 2016](#)), and to this date, Pakistan is no exception to the case.

The founding father of Pakistan, Quaid e Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah, explicitly mentioned, “You may belong to any religion or caste or creed – that has nothing to do with the business of the state. We are starting with this fundamental principle: that we are all citizens and equal citizens of one State” ([Jinnah, 2013](#)). Also, the constitution of Pakistan acknowledges this statement by ensuring certain rights of the minorities, which include freedom to practice their religion, to manage religious institutions, safeguards their religious education, and equality of citizenship. Apart from this, Pakistan has signed many other treaties and

is a member of national and international organizations which claim to serve human rights irrespective of religion, race, and caste.

Unfortunately, most of the steps taken by these organization or laws passed by the government has been the victim of social, cultural of religious politics (Malik, 2002; Rauf, Muhammad, & Saleem, 2021). The human rights bestowed to minorities by the true Islamic ideology were also not realized. The real Islamic ideology in Pakistan has been stolen by a faction of individuals who use faith to diverse ends, to safeguard political places and territorial influence, drive out corrosive western influence and are involved in class warfare (Haider, 2013). As a result, apart from the Muslim majority, the negative ramification of this situation is adversely faced by minorities in Pakistan.

According to the Census, Muslim citizens comprise 96.28% of the total population of Pakistan. In total, 1.59% of the population comprises Christians (Rifat, 2017). Being the second-largest religious community in Pakistan, undoubtedly, they reflect the condition of how minorities are treated in this Islamic country.

However, the findings of the studies conducted to explore the status of Christians in Pakistan cannot be seen through rose-coloured glasses. Mehfooz (2021) asserted that Pakistan is an unstable country in which minorities feel uneasy about passing their lives according to their rituals and beliefs. Forum of human rights often highlights that Christians in Pakistan are facing discrimination, hatred, and intolerance in Pakistan. They argue that these issues may hinder the smooth functions of society and that issues of minorities are generally overlooked or ignored. Confusion between culture and religion, religious extremism, and ignorance has hindered the provision of cultural and political rights of minorities in Pakistan (Rauf et al., 2021). One of the Christian NGOs described the condition of Christian in Pakistan that they are living with the constant pain of anxiety, insecurity, and marginalization. They are also discriminated against and victimized socially, ethnically, and economically. Constitutional and legal matters are linked to the negative attitude of administration, police, judiciary, and the local majority of Muslims towards Christians and other minority groups. Religious minorities are considered undesirable for the Islamic state rather than full citizens who can offer valuable services in political and civic life. Moreover, no serious effort has yet been

made to examine their role in the promotion of interfaith dialogue, imparting liberal education and health facilities (Chawla, 2018).

Despite the above discrimination, the services of Christian minorities in different areas, including the army, civil service, police and local administration, education, and the health sector, are numerous (Rais, 2007). Their role in making and building the nation of Pakistan is evident from their contributions in the field of education, welfare, health, economy, politics, and communal harmony (Chawla, 2018). They have immensely contributed to the noble profession of teaching. This is an irrefutable fact that the missionaries performed a vital role in bringing English medium education to what was known as British India in 1854. The churches continued their endeavours to develop more institutions with modern education. In fact, within fifty years, hundreds of institutions and an increasing number of students reflected the centrality of education as the missionary objective. Even after the partition of the subcontinent, the institutes governed by missionaries continued to set higher benchmarks for quality education. Unfortunately, in 1972 matters started changing dramatically during the nationalization of educational institutions, including the missionary's schools.

Over time, practices of the teaching profession began to change. Most Muslim students also started getting an education in missionary schools through Christian teachers according to the prescribed curriculum by the Government of Pakistan. On the other side, short in numbers, but Christian teachers were also seen in other state schools, which were established for Muslims especially and inclusively for other students of different religions as well. These teachers, after qualifying the criteria and through proper channels, join the public schools in the quota system. These teachers are serving on the same standards provided by the state without discrimination to all students and especially to the Muslim majority.

Unfortunately, not only in the political and economic sectors but the marginalization of the minorities is also reflected in the education sector (Muhammad & Brett, 2020). Textbooks, policy documents, and curriculum are insensitive towards the cultural and ethnic diversity of the state (Muhammad & Brett, 2017). Dayan, Khan, and Ali (2017) expressed that there is a need for school leaders and teachers to broaden their views and accommodate religious diversity. Khokhar and Muhammad (2020)

shared their findings that the textbooks failed to portray the habitus of its ethnic and religious minorities, and the discourse did not integrate their habitus into the national habitus of Pakistan.

As the teacher is the final authority in the class, they deal with all the issues arising out from curriculum to the teaching practice in the class. Moreover, at the end of the minorities who also serve as teachers, there is an additional duty to deal with the parents and students of the Muslim majority. Currently, Christian teachers are serving in both public and private schools, and a vast number of Muslim students are found in missionary schools. Because they serve as an integral part of the nation's education system, it is worth knowing the issues faced by Christian teachers during their teaching practice with both Muslims and Christian students and parents. Previous research and reports consist mostly of basic human rights and their availability to minorities in most of the Muslim society. All research studies revolve around critical issues like blasphemy laws, forced conversion, false charges of blasphemy, persecution, and inhuman behavior of society. It is important to explicitly explore the problems faced by Christian teachers in Pakistan firstly because they play a significant role in shaping the minds and upbringing of the future generation of Pakistan. Secondly, if the gap is left unfilled, our adversaries will take advantage of this (Rauf et al., 2021). Against this backdrop, the present study aims to acquire deep information regarding the nature of problems faced by Christian teachers during their teaching practices with Christian and Muslim students, Christian and Muslim parents, and colleagues. It also investigates the problems being faced by Christian teachers concerning government support.

Methods

The situation of non-Muslims within Islamic societies has always been a focus of research with different approaches in social and political science. This research uses phenomenological research design since it assists in describing what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon and helps in studying the universal essence of that phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

Ten Christian teachers were selected purposefully from the four schools of district Gujrat to

make the study manageable. Purposeful sampling was used because it helps to gain insight from a specific group (Campbell et al., 2020; Denieffe, 2020). In addition, at the time of the interview, ten Christian teachers were available voluntarily; six of them were from private schools and four from public schools. Four female and six male teachers participated. These Christian teachers were teaching for a long time to different grades. School subjects were also kept in view at the time of selection of participants. These teachers were teaching different subjects like Science, Mathematics, Urdu, and English.

A semi-structured interview guide was developed after reading relevant literature to get an insight into the perception of Christian teachers (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018; Cosgrove, Corrie, & Wolever, 2021). Six dimensions were chalked out to understand the problems of Christian teachers as follows: Difficulties in a career as a Christian teacher, hurdles in teaching to Christian and Muslim students, the behavior of Muslim parents, the behavior of Christian parents, the behavior of society and required support of Government for Christian teachers (Gregory, 2012; Iqbal, 2015; Malik, 2002; Mehfooz, 2021). Open-ended questions were used to gain insight into the teacher's experience related to the topic. When needed, probing questions were also used because interacting through different side questions can find the true and situational answers from participants (Seidman, 2019). Ethical considerations such as informed consent, confidentiality, and trust were strictly followed during the research process (Ryen, 2021). The interviews were transcribed and then translated into the English language. The translation of interviews was supervised and rechecked by a person proficient in the English language.

Data were analyzed through qualitative content analysis, which is a method for systematically describing the meaning of qualitative data (Schreiber, 2012). In this research, collected data from the teachers are tabulated according to the order of answers given by the participants. The transcribed interviews were read several times to facilitate open and then pattern coding (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2020; Saldaña, 2021). Based on the patterns, all the results in each category were synthesized into integrated results (Miles et al., 2020).

Table 1. Demographic Information of the Participants

Participants	Academic Qualification	Professional Qualification	Affiliation	Age	Gender	Experience (In Years)
Participant 1	BA	BEd	Private	47	Female	20
Participant 2	BSc	BEd	Private	27	Male	02
Participant 3	MA	MEd	Private	35	Female	07
Participant 4	BS Communication	NILL	Private	27	Female	02
Participant 5	BA	BEd	Public	28	Male	05
Participant 6	MA Pakistan Studies	NILL	Private	40	Female	12
Participant 7	MA Histoiy	BEd	Public	38	Female	07
Participant 8	MA Urdu	MEd	Private	48	Male	16
Participant 9	BSc	NILL	Public	30	Male	05
Participant 10	MSc IT	BEd	Public	35	Male	06

Findings

The Attitudes of Christian and Muslim Students

When asked about the attitude of Christian and Muslim students, most of the teachers stated that they did not face any problems and that they performed well in the classroom. Teachers mentioned that they did not discriminate against students based on religion. Respondents believed that they were only teachers, and they should also behave like teachers. Most of them stated that it was exceedingly rare that they faced any problem from the students. However, one teacher mentioned, “not only Muslim teachers but many times, Muslim students ask Christian students that Islam is righteous religion and become Muslim,” which disturbed them mentally, and they must deal with the situation tactfully.

The Attitudes of Christian and Muslim Parents

Questions were asked to teachers about the behavior of Muslim parents towards them. Most teachers answered that they did not face any harsh behavior from parents of Muslim students. Teachers mentioned that they were happy in this society, and due respect was given to them as one of them said, “I have been teaching for 20 years and never faced any problem. I only heard on TV and media that something bad is happening, but I have never seen or faced any issues like this” (Participant 1). Moreover, teachers stated that many parents were concerned with good results rather than the religion of a teacher.

However, only a few teachers pointed out the differences in parents’ attitudes. They mentioned that parents who come from abroad are more polite

towards them. Also, a teacher stated that sometimes parents were of the view that only Muslim teachers should teach their children.

It was interesting to note the attitudes of Christian parents. Teachers mentioned that parents of Christian students feel safe when their children are taught by Christian teachers because they are afraid of some issues which they face in a society like forced conversion into Islam and discrimination in society.

The Attitudes of Muslim Colleagues

Most teachers were not satisfied with the attitude of Muslim colleagues. They shared that some Muslim colleagues did not give them due respect and even did not like to eat with them. One teacher explained this thought differently. He said, “It is all because of a lack of education and a lack of interest in their religion” (Participant 3). Some teachers stated that in Pakistani society, they are only identified by one word, “Choorha.” They said that although they were working as a teacher, no due respect was given to them, and Muslim colleagues looked upon them as unwanted persons.

They said that not only the uneducated people, but most even their educated Muslim colleagues also sometimes behaved in a strange way: “They make us realize that Christians are just like filthy people even they are educated and even they are in the same profession” (Participant 6). One male teacher from a public school complained, “I have suffered from mental torture from my head and staff. I am treated as an inferior person” (Participant 10). He further elaborated, “the head of my school does not allow any casual leave or any other relaxation in school which other staff can avail, even on religious festivals like

Christmas and Easter I am not allowed to avail any leave. The headteacher complains to authorities and teases me in different manners” (Participant 10). A teacher also reported, “It is easy to teach Muslim students, but it is not easy to work in a school having Muslim administration” (Participant 8).

Another male teacher stated that the community looked down upon Christian teachers with affection. He claimed that he was treated as an inferior person, and his Muslim colleagues even did not like to eat with him on the same plates. Teachers also suggested that there was a need to change the mindset of the people through education and training: “It should be taught to all teachers whether they are Muslim or belong to any other religion that they should think only as teachers and should respectably treat all minorities. Their religion, Islam, emphasizes peace and equality” (Participant 5).

Support Needs of Christian Teachers

The majority of Christian teachers from missionary schools claimed that they wanted financial support from the government. They asked for lifetime gratuity or pension for Christian teachers to be given by the government. Teachers also recommended that the government should give scholarships to brilliant students of minorities and bring improvement in the quota system to support minorities in Pakistan.

Discussion

Diversity of experience was reported by the participants of this study. Christian teachers were satisfied with the attitude of the children with them. This may be because teachers work as authoritarian figures in the class where children are supposed to behave respectfully. Moreover, the minds of the young children are not inclined towards religious discrimination or are polluted socially and politically, and they respect teachers who deal professionally and affectionately.

Teachers also mentioned that most of the parents were kind and respectful to them. Only a few parents showed their reservations regarding the teacher not being Muslim. The findings also showed that the attitude of the parents improves with their exposure to foreign lands and better living conditions. This demonstrates that it is with exposure, some parents learn that it is better to appreciate diversity than to fight with it. Coming to the Christian parents, naturally, they were more comfortable with Christian

teachers as they do not have to face the issue of forced conversion to Islam with them, and Christian teachers can motivate Christian students to work hard for good and respectful professions.

The findings revealed that the attitude of the Muslim colleagues was most disturbing of all. This finding also strengthens the literature that the minorities in Pakistan think that they have been severely discriminated against and humiliated based on their religious beliefs and treated as lower-class citizens ([Khalid & Rashid, 2019](#)). The use of derogatory words for Christians—which means polluted and impure—is also evident from previous studies ([Khalid & Rashid, 2019](#)). Such findings elaborate the ramifications of the deep-rooted religious discrimination in our socio-political culture. It also elaborates that our education system is highly insensitive towards religious diversity, and it fails to nurture the values of tolerance, patience, and acceptance in our people. Such attitude of Muslims colleagues also informs us about the superficial understanding of Islam. This shows that other than religious discrimination, Christian teachers may also face the negative outcomes of professional competition.

As demonstrated by the previous studies issue of forced conversion remained there to be faced by the Christians of the society. Although this is a clear violation of human rights practice of forced conversion of minorities is common even in many countries which are since many people mostly fail to appreciate the religious beliefs and loyalty of non-Muslims ([Mehfooz, 2021](#)). Most of the people fail to appreciate the religious beliefs and loyalty of non-Muslims. The findings of this research also strengthen the literature that in Pakistan, religious extremists use bitter words and negative labels for non-religious factions to reveal their hatred, both in society and the workplace ([Mehfooz, 2021](#)).

Few teachers also faced adjustment problems with their heads and senior staff. They complained that Christian teachers face discrimination and are not treated well even concerning basic working rights. Literature shows that non-Muslims in Pakistan face structural obstacles and socio-political issues while seeking a job. Although the Government of Pakistan has increased the non-Muslim quota up to 5% in jobs for educated religious minorities, on many occasions, they are exploited just because they are smaller in number ([Khalid & Rashid, 2019](#)). The situation

stresses the need to develop the skill for acceptance and appreciation of diversity to senior officials. This condition reflects that there is a dire need for transparency and maintenance of law and order in the recruitment process to avoid injustice to minorities.

Conclusion

Although violation of religious rights is common around the world, yet it cannot be justified. Being an Islamic state, Pakistan should serve as a role model for the realization of religious rights. Fortunately, according to quite a few sources (Bhattacharya 2018; Pakistan Security Report 2018), the violence against minorities has declined in the last two years (CRSS Annual Security Report Special Edition 2013–2018). Nevertheless, we cannot assert that the existing situation is acceptable. The dream of an Islamic and

peaceful state cannot be realized unless the rights of minorities are fully comprehended. Progress and political stability will be ensured only if the rights of minorities are not exploited, as it will make the country a convenient target for its adversaries. It may cause inequalities, rebellious attitudes, and brain drain.

Minority teachers serve as a building block of a nation and should be given due privilege and respect. To improve the situation of minority teachers in Pakistan, we need both top-down and bottom-up approaches. More practical steps should be taken for the enforcement of rights guaranteed by the constitution of Pakistan by both state and society. Religious leaders and schools can play an important role in developing the skills of conflict resolution, communication, and tolerance in people to cater to religious diversity and avoid violence and hatred.

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