

Chapter 12

RELIGIOUS PLURALISM AND INTERFAITH HARMONY

Interfaith harmony embodies the notion of live and let live. In a world of increasing political and economic dissonance, peaceful coexistence among practitioners of various religious beliefs can prove to be the way forward for peace and prosperity. Strengthening interfaith harmony and religious diversity can be instrumental in the development and progress of Pakistan. Unfortunately, due to the baggage of communalism, traced back to 1947 when India and Pakistan won their respective freedoms from the British, there is a dire need to spread the message of acceptance and sharing, especially among the Hindus, Christians and Muslims. This is a must for a peaceful and developed Pakistan where there is an interfaith harmony among various religious entities and sects, which are presently inharmonious due to unhealed wounds of the Partition and other factors, both external and internal.

The human rights situation, particularly of the minorities, is precarious though the present scenario is in sharp contrast to the history of this land replete with exemplary stories of religious pluralism. Thus, the interfaith harmony is part of a neglected history of Pakistan, which is of huge import to remember again today, and claim for any envisioning of a harmonious future of the South Asian region, and for the world as well. For a peaceful Pakistan, it is important to tap into the deeper layers of the indigenous history of our region.

The Plan envisages fostering religious and social harmony, and helping develop a pluralistic society in Pakistan in which people of different beliefs can live together in peace, and exercise their rights, guaranteed by the Constitution of Pakistan. The recent events of Pakistan have provided the state with a strong rationale to pursue the augmentation of religious tolerance and amicable conflict resolution. Learning from the vast historical background of the country, that preaches and promotes interfaith harmony and religious diversity, the state plans to inculcate these values back into policy-making for valuable peace and development outcomes. The state is aware of the crying need for promotion of tolerance, religious freedom and mutual acceptance to assure justice.

Situational analysis

Out of total population of approximately 184 million in 2013-14, projected according to the 1998 census, 95 per cent are Muslims. The rest five per cent are Christians, Hindus Parsis, Zoroastrians, Bahais, Sikhs, Buddhists, and small portions of Kalasha, Kihals, and Jains. During the recent past, minorities have faced individualised discrimination, which have marginalised them as individuals. To address these issues, there is a need for promotion of tolerance, religious freedom and mutual acceptance for ensuring justice.

Currently, religious minorities are deemed to be politically disadvantaged, economically poor and socially segregated in the larger picture, resulting in limited opportunities of jobs, labour, wages, and social security. Among other challenges, major ones are considered to be inequitable laws and policies, ignorance about others' rights and misperceptions, illiteracy and

hatred for other religions, intolerance, poverty, extremism, gaps in curriculum, violations of merit and external interferences.

While looking at the weaknesses in the interfaith harmony, the main issues are: lack of interfaith dialogue, misinterpretation of religions, poor political will, self-centred biased thoughts, lack of social and cultural assimilation, poor religious knowledge, political instability, economic crisis, poor social safety net, non-religious sensitised budgets, projects, interventions and initiatives.

It is not only the minority non-Muslims, who are threatened by radicalists, rather the moderate people who show little or no inclination for recognising certain extremist elements. While the moderates refer themselves to be the majority in Pakistan, the ones under a direct threat of violence are those, who are vocal about their progressive views, and they are also in a minority. The unchecked manipulation of religion by certain elements, asserting themselves over others' beliefs, has taken a dangerous turn. This trend has augmented, especially when it is seen in the context of the post-9/11 scenario and global perspective of the War on Terror. This has not only tarnished Pakistan's image across the globe, rather it has created doubts about the Pakistani nation's mindset, which has been groomed to accept differences of all hues, and it has practically proven it over the decades.

Serious tensions arise when a group thinks it has the right to dictate how the others should practice their religion. This promotes a narrow fundamentalist minority view of Islam in an institutionalised manner, through media and others, with the result that today these minority extremist voices are the most heard as they encroach the public space in the perceived absence of moderates and the political will not to let this happen. On the other hand, the progressive voices of the civil society are not vocal enough, and thus stand marginalised. In the middle of these two ends, lies a risk and silent majority. This scenario spreads more ignorance about the core values of Islam, which like most other religions — Christianity, Judaism, Sikhism, Buddhism, Jainism — preaches universal values of equity, tolerance, and best behaviour for all.

Plan

To achieve the desired level of the religious and interfaith harmony, doable interventions are envisaged in future policy options for integrating different segments of the society and investing in the youth, who are the future of Pakistan. There is a dire need to sense new possibilities, estimating from the young generation of the Pakistani politicians, professionals, development workers, civil society, writers, artists, actors and creative people, who are all ready and working towards for a positive change. A Pakistani culture that moves past the old narratives, stories of hate, and dominance of hatred in the culture, to a newly imagined place rich in regional culture and a plethora of voices that have long been silenced. For this, a brave effort is needed to face the facts of history, claim it and move ahead beyond fear but with a focus on peace, mutual acceptance and tolerance. The following actions are, therefore, proposed to supplement these notions:

- Establishment of an apex body to register and regulate the functions of all Medressahs
- Establishment of a regulatory body (with representation from all religions) to regulate all religious institutions including mosques, temples, gurdwaras and churches
- Revert to the Quaid-e-Azam's vision: 'You may belong to any religion or caste or creed; that has nothing to do with the business of the state.'

- Review and revision of policies and practices to ensure basic human rights for all as equal citizens of Pakistan
- Formulate laws for the proper implementation of existing policies and cultural practices for promoting religious and interfaith harmony
- Take immediate action towards promoting peace, mutual acceptance and tolerance to diminish such elements, which are openly promoting hate campaign towards minorities and other excluded and vulnerable segments of population
- Create a reporting mechanism for cases of discrimination against religious minorities
- Representation of all religions in curriculum designing board and implement one curriculum in all Medressahs, schools and institutions, especially of the public sector
- Inclusion of interfaith harmony component (with a focus on commonalities) in the curriculum from the pre-school level
- Promote religious tourism, social and cultural gatherings
- Prevent misuse and misinterpretation of the blasphemy laws
- Allocations of resources for development of minorities across the board

Expected achievements and targets

The programme-wise physical targets for religious pluralism and interfaith harmony, and expected outcome during the Plan period are given as Annexure-A.

Annexure-A

Implementation Plan with targets for the Plan

Policy/Programme interventions	Output/Outcome	Indicators	Implementing agencies	Target 2013-18
1	2	3	4	5
Establishment of an apex body to register and regulate all religious institutions	Inclusion of all religions and beliefs' diversity Provided one platform for representation of all religions in registration and regulation process of religious institutions	Number of meetings and decisions of the apex body regarding interfaith harmony and inclusion of religious diversity	Ministry of Interior Ministry of Law, Justice and Human Rights (MoJ&HR)	An apex body to register and regulate all religious institutions Formed and fully functional
Review and revision of all relevant laws; prevent misuse and misinterpretation of blasphemy laws; formulate laws for proper implementation of existing policies for promoting interfaith harmony	Realised equal citizenship to all religious and beliefs' diversity Removal of cultural and other discriminatory patterns	Removal of biased laws in economic, social and cultural scenario Number of pending laws reviewed and revised Number of reported cases of discrimination against religious minorities	Ministry of Religious Affairs and Interfaith Harmony (MoJ&HR) Ministry of Interior Provincial law and home departments	All the existing relevant laws and policies will be reviewed and removed in accordance with the Constitution and legal framework for effective enforcement
Raising awareness for elimination of discrimination against religious minorities	Improved level of awareness and sensitisation about mutual acceptance at family, community and national levels	Number of incidence of violence, abuse and discrimination against religious minorities at community, institutional and other levels	MoRA&IH Ministry of Information and Broadcasting Provincial information departments, Media organisations	Urban and rural population sensitised on religion-based discrimination and violence Special programmes, plays, dialogues, talks shows and forums organised and telecast
Inclusion of religious minorities in all social and financial safety nets programmes and packages	Reduced level of sense of deprivation and exclusion among religious minorities	Number of minorities' beneficiaries in each safety net programmes and financial packages	PBM, income support programmes, provincial social welfare departments, social security institutions and fiscal packages authorities	All the deserving population of minorities will be given equal opportunities and benefits from the social safety nets programmes and financial packages