

Minorities Worship Places Under Constant Attack In Pakistan.

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Victims urge the state to take effective measures and clear stance to make Pakistan inclusive

By Waqar Hussain

Kashif Nawab, 40, is a regular church-goer in Yohanabad, a majority Christian neighborhood in Lahore. However, after a terrorist attack on two churches in March 2015, he feels himself insecure while going to Church every Sunday.

“Though I live nearby a church in my locality, the attacks on churches have created a sense of insecurity in me and many others. We are still traumatized,” Nawab, a human rights activist and a private job holder, said, adding, “For the most of time, when I go to Church I fear anything can happen anytime and I feel whether I will go back to my home (alive) or not.” He feels there is more threat to minorities’ dominant neighborhoods.

Extremist and terrorist groups in Pakistan have been attacking worship places of religious minorities and minority Muslim sects in the society across the country for the past more than two decades, killing hundreds. There have been attacks on Shiite mosques and Imambargahs; Bohra worship places;

Ahmadiyya community worship places; churches; and Hindu temples.

According to the research, separately conducted by Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) and National Commission for Justice and Peace (NCJP), two different organizations working on minorities' rights, there have been more than 50 major incidents of targeted and mob attacks on churches, Hindu temples and Ahmadi community places on religious grounds, in last two decades. While, there have been nearly 40 attacks by terrorist and militant groups on the minorities worship places.

Other than terror attacks, the worship places are vandalized by Muslim majority mob on false accusations, blasphemy allegations, land-grabbing and to oust them from the areas on the basis of hatred and religious discrimination, the studies indicate.

Muhammad Muzahir Shigri, Punjab secretary information Majlis Wahdatul Muslimeen (MWM), a Shiite religio-political group, said there were more than 50 major attacks on Shiite worship places and Shiite processions in the past 20 years killing hundreds of their community members. He said these attacks plan to hinder their practicing of faith freely and without fear.

Salimuddin, spokesperson of Ahmadiyya community in Pakistan, said from 1984 to 2017 as many as 27 Ahmadi mosques have been forcibly demolished; 21 worship places of the community were set on fire; construction of 57 mosques was forcibly stopped; and 17 mosques have been forcibly occupied by different other groups. Two of the worship places in Lahore were also attacked killing nearly 100 people, he added.

Due to the situation, the minorities, in general, live in the grip of fear even during the worship, a right guaranteed in the Constitution of Pakistan, many believe.

Article 20 of Constitution of Pakistan guarantees "freedom to profess religion and to manage religious institutions". It reads: "Subject to law, public order and morality:- (a) every citizen shall have the right to profess, practice and propagate his religion; and (b) every religious denomination and every sect thereof shall have the right to establish, maintain and manage its religious institutions."

While, Article 36 of the Constitution reads: "The State shall safeguard the legitimate rights and interests of minorities, including their due representation in the Federal and Provincial services."

Peter Jacob, executive director of Centre for Social Justice, said attacks on worship places in Pakistan are not new. "As far as the largest populated province, Punjab is concerned the history of attacks on worship places is older than Pakistan. Even at the time of Partition there were attacks on worship places of different communities including Sikhs."

"For last 20 years, we are seeing that the worship places are being attacked by mobs and terrorists. There have been armed attacks on mosques, Imambargahs, churches and other worship places."

Jacob said the Supreme Court of Pakistan passed a landmark judgment in 2014 to safeguard rights of religious minorities. A part of the judgment was to establish Special Force to protect minorities worship places. However, the government has not taken any practical step in this direction yet, he lamented. The responsibility of protecting these places, gradually, has been shifted to the particular community or sect

those have constituted their volunteer groups.

“Security of worship places is not much satisfactory. There are different intimidations in cities which are not visible like other rural areas,” Mobarik A. Virk from Ahmadi community observed, adding, “With the gradual increase in attacks on Ahmadi worship places, now the community mostly practices faith in private houses rather openly.” With this growing intolerance, he said, women are the most vulnerable as they have stopped going to worship places because of their particular *burqa* dress. With the increase in attacks on our worship places, women and children are mostly not allowed to come to worship places, he disclosed.

Virk believed the state, as per constitution, should protect every citizen irrespective of cost, color, religion and safeguard their rights to make Pakistan an inclusive and pluralistic society. “But state is afraid of religious clergy,” he maintained.

A June 2014 judgment by a three-member bench of Supreme Court of Pakistan headed by the then Chief Justice Tassadaq Jilani, the court directed the respective government(s) to take special measures to protect minorities worship places.

“A Special Police Force be established with professional training to protect the places of worship of minorities.” The court also said that in all cases of violation of any of the rights guaranteed under the law or desecration of the places of worship of minorities, the concerned Law Enforcing Agencies should promptly take action including the registration of criminal cases against the delinquents. The court observed: “We find that the incidents of desecration of places of worship of minorities could be warded off if the authorities concerned had taken preventive measures at the appropriate time.” The Court also found that the inaction on the part of law enforcement agencies was on account of the lack of proper understanding of the relevant law. The judgment reads.

“There is need to take actual steps to prevent attacks on worship places,” says Najam U Din, director Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP), an independent non-government organization. “State needs to ensure prevention of attacks through intelligence, and sentence the culprits through prosecution.” There are hardly a few incidents where actual culprits have been arrested and sentenced to set example, he said. The HRCP director observed that the situation has created a perception in general that it sides with the majority mindset while the marginalized groups are compelled to compromise and are given a sense that there is no justice for them.

“The state needs to create equilibrium and evolve a focused strategy announcing that such attacks will not be tolerated at all and worship places would be protected by at any cost,” he suggested, adding, “But, unfortunately, the track record of the government to curb these attacks is not good yet.” The commission, recently, also held a consultation engaging minorities to discuss ways and means to better protect their worship places.

A recent statement by Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on Human Rights Council 36th session urged Pakistan to take effective measures to protect rights religious minorities in Pakistan. Talking about rights issues in 40 countries, including Pakistan, he said; “In



Pakistan, the authorities often encourage intolerance for minorities or minority views, with sometimes deadly consequences. Even allegations of blasphemy or suggestions that blasphemy laws require revision to comply with the right to freedom of thought and religion can lead to vigilante violence.”

Though there is a growing sense of insecurity in minorities while terming the security measures by the police unsatisfactory but a conviction is there to protect faith. “Hence it is a matter of faith so we also go to church with more conviction with promise to fight this type of violence and terrorism,” Nawab affirmed urging state to step forward to safeguard them.

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