



## **Plight of Scheduled Caste Hindus in Pakistan**

**By Mazhar Iqbal**

We should rise above caste, sect and creed and only follow the objectives of democracy, Yousuf Raza Gilani, the prime minister of Pakistan said during a recent visit to Gilgit-Baltistan.

He was also quoted as saying “democracy gives assurance of freedom to practice any religion or sect.”

“Mohtarma Benazir Bhutto always issued party tickets to the members regardless of sectarian basis,” Gilani also said.

Pakistani politicians have always been vocal about giving fundamental rights to all segments of society. The first and foremost claim in this regard was made by none other than the founder of the nation. However, it is said that Jinnah was genuine in his concern for the low caste Hindus of Pakistan, but, things began to change after his death. Though, the ruling Pakistan Peoples Party has the largest vote bank of scheduled castes in Sindh, they are strangers in corridors of power in Karachi and Islamabad.

Approximately, more than three million Hindus live in Pakistan, of which about 2.5 million are from the scheduled castes. The most prominent among scheduled castes are

Meghwals, Odhs, Valmikis, Kohlis and Bhels. Famous Mannu Bhel case, which was taken by much revered chief justice of Pakistan, was of Bhel community. Most of the scheduled castes live in districts Umerkot and Tharparkar in Sindh. Former Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz entered into political arena of Pakistan after winning the National Assembly seat from this constituency. Similarly, former chief minister Sindh Arbab Ghulam Rahim was also from this constituency.

There is also significant presence of scheduled caste Hindus in districts Bahawalpur and Rahim Yar Khan in Punjab.

Amazingly, the successive governments in Pakistan have never disclosed the exact number of scheduled caste population, which in itself is creating ambiguity about realistic figures. The Scheduled Castes Federation of Pakistan (SCFP), an organization representing the scheduled castes in the country, has recently demanded that their actual numbers should be reflected and represented in political and legislative arrangements. In a letter written to the Constitutional Reforms Committee of the Senate, this organization urged the government to conduct a census of Dalits, which were separate from upper caste Hindus, so that their precise number in the national population could be ascertained.

The term “scheduled castes” emerged in political and constitutional history of Pakistan on November 12, 1957, when the Ministry of Law issued a presidential ordinance to declare certain non-Muslim castes as “scheduled castes.” Accordingly, 40 castes were added to this schedule. The ordinance was called the Scheduled Castes (Declaration) Ordinance, 1957. It was declared that these scheduled castes would be given some special status in population welfare matters, e.g. allocation of reserved quota for them was assured. However, this quota was never implemented in letter and spirit till 1998, when this law was revoked in regrettable circumstances. Due to lack of constitutional protection, the scheduled castes’ representation in legislature, judiciary, government services and education has been miserable.

These scheduled caste communities are the majority in the minority but they are mostly neglected by the upper caste Hindus and feudal lords. According to any standard of living, they are the most deprived community. The reason is there is no room for them in political hierarchy of Pakistan. Though the ruling Pakistan Peoples Party has the largest vote bank in Sindh, most of the scheduled caste communities are deprived of basic human rights. According to unofficial estimates, around 75 per cent scheduled caste Hindus work as bonded labour. Most of these scheduled caste Hindus work as landless agricultural labourers and sweepers. A large number of their population work as tenants but some are also involved in the brick-kiln and leather works. They have been living in huts in rural areas of Sindh and Punjab since decades.

The Law and Justice Commission of Pakistan has announced that 2009 would be the year of focus on justice at grassroots levels. The much-trumpeted judicial activism in Pakistan may prove a gust of fresh wind for these poor classes. In rural areas their huts are located in separate settlements outside the main village and they generally lack even basic amenities. They also live nomadic life, traveling from village to village in search of manual work. Many live in temporary structures in the land of landlords.

Land mafias in rural Sindh and Punjab often forcibly grab the land on which scheduled castes set up their huts. In most places scheduled castes have no temples of their own. They have few places where they can burn their dead, and many of these are illegally occupied by local feudals. Majority of scheduled caste Hindus do not send their girls to school fearing that they might be kidnapped raped. Most of the scheduled castes do not possess national identity cards, the important document, which could give some realistic figures about their status.

In 2002, of the nine seats reserved for the Sindh provincial assembly for religious minorities, seven were for Hindus and only one for scheduled castes. According to unofficial reports Dalits, like other minorities in Pakistan are also victims of religious discrimination, by both Muslims as well as 'upper' caste Hindus. Despite the Hindus being minorities in Pakistan, 'upper' caste Hindus continue to discriminate against the Dalits. Generally, these communities are refused entry into Hindu temples belonging to the 'upper' castes. There is a growing need for the establishment of a national commission in Pakistan to monitor the conditions of the scheduled castes.

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