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Will 'single national curriculum' be able to end systematic discrimination against religious minorities in Pakistan?

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Master of Science in Journalism



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WILL ‘SINGLE NATIONAL CURRICULUM’ BE ABLE TO END SYSTEMATIC DISCRIMINATION AGAINST RELIGIOUS MINORITIES IN PAKISTAN?

This capstone report is submitted to the Faculty of Faculty of Business Administration as partial fulfillment of Master of Science in Journalism degree

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Dedication

I dedicate my capstone work to my family and friends who never left my side and encouraged me to fulfil this dream. This work is also dedicated to all the people who were kind and gracious to give me their time to turn this dream into a reality.

Acknowledgement

I wish to thank my mentor Muna Khan for continuously supporting my project and editing my work even to the last detail. A special thanks to Kamal Siddiqi for being there when I needed his help and always encouraging me to achieve my goals. Also, I would like to thank my mentor-teachers, Shahzeb Ahmed Hashim, M. Qaseem Saeed, Morial Shah and Hammad Sarfaraz for guiding me throughout my journey. I will always be grateful for such powerful faculty members who were present to make me believe in myself when I was doubtful.

Table of Contents

Abstract	vii
The never-ending ordeal of religious minorities in Pakistan	1
Religious Minorities and National Curriculum of Pakistan	3
Education in Pakistan	4
Single National Curriculum 2020-2021 (SNC)	5
Impact of flawed education system	7
References	17

Abstract

Being a bilingual and multiethnic country, Pakistan is a multi-religion state where non-Muslims are a sizable part of the society and many of whom have contributed enormously to its wellbeing as well.

The country's population is overwhelmingly Muslim; therefore, the Islamic education is more dominant in its national curriculum and is also reflected in the customs and traditions.

Therefore, the teachings of Islam and its importance are conveyed to society including non-Muslims.

In a multiethnic, religiously diverse and sectarian state of Pakistan, the protection and delivery of basic human rights have always been a challenging task to be provided by the state authorities and policy makers.

The major example of the systematic discrimination is the negligence and misrepresentation of the religious minorities in the national curriculum.

Furthermore, the textbooks that follow the National Curriculum, express the reflection of Islamic teachings in its education policy. The educational material attempts to teach Islamiyat to all students, irrespective of their faith, through the compulsory subjects; Pakistan and social studies, Urdu, English and Science.

The current federal government has taken a ‘revolutionary’ step to reform the education policy in the country by proposing a Single National Curriculum (SNC) 2021 - 2022.

The federal government is willing to end this discriminatory and outdated education system by implementing SNC. They are confident that this new model will end the discrimination among classes (rich, poor and middle class) and among other faith communities.

The new education model of SNC has been followed by the emerging international trends in teaching, learning and assessments, which develops analytical skills, critical thinking and creativity in students.

However, the question remains; "Will ‘Single National Curriculum’ be able to end systematic discrimination against religious minorities in Pakistan?"

Every year on August 11, Pakistan celebrates National Minorities Day to honor the services and sacrifices of the country’s religious minorities. The founder of the nation, Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah was the first to recognize the rights of non-Muslims as equal to Muslims. On that day in 1947 in his landmark speech, Jinnah said, “You are free to go to your temples, you are free to go to your mosques or to any other place of worship in this state of Pakistan. You may belong to any religion or caste or creed, that has nothing to do with the business of State.” (Jinnah, 1947) However, after 73 years of independence, the country has still not been able to provide the basic rights to its non-Muslim citizens. Religious minorities have continued to face discrimination, violence, intimidation and do not have the freedom of expression with authorities often failing to provide them adequate protection.

The never-ending ordeal of religious minorities in Pakistan

The intolerance and discrimination against minorities has strong roots in the country. Hindus, Sikhs, Christians and so forth are still identified and judged on the basis of their religion not nationality. In recent years, the country has witnessed a rise in the cases of discrimination and violence against religious minorities in the country where they have been prosecuted under blasphemy laws (Ali, 2020). Forced conversions to Islam and forced marriages of underage girls are among the most reported cases of violence against these groups, according to BBC Asia report 2014.

Against this tense backdrop, last year in June, in a move ostensibly meant to allay fears that the *Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf* (PTI) government wasn’t addressing issues, Prime Minister Imran

Khan approved the building of the first Hindu temple in Islamabad (Ellis-Petersen, 2020).

It is commendable that the PTI government has taken some very crucial steps to take the religious minorities on board with them. Last year, in May, the federal cabinet, chaired by the Prime Minister, established the National Commission for Minorities (NMC).

The Ministry of Religious Affairs and Interfaith Harmony on notified the reconstituted NCM, six years after a 2014 judgment of the Supreme Court called for the creations of such a body, and its terms of reference which include, ensuring that worship places of non-Muslim communities are preserved and kept in a functional condition and also, development of a national policy to promote peace and interfaith harmony in the country.

The capital's first temple was supposed to be a symbol of tolerance. Instead, many Muslim politicians and clerics halted the building, a reflection of Pakistan's troubled relationship with its religious minorities (Tanzeem, 2020).

The event stirred up a wave of debate all over the country. Young supporters of Islamist groups protested the construction of the temple, while the Hindus demanded their right to build a place of worship ((UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM, 2021).

The incident also highlighted the level of intolerance towards the religious minorities. This isn't the only incident that has made headlines but in 2021, a 100-year-old Hindu temple was attacked in Rawalpindi¹⁰.

What are the factors behind the rising intolerance towards the minority communities which, includes, Hindus (1,6%), Christians, and Sikhs – all, small in numbers. After all, 96% of the population is Muslims, according to the 2018 data of Pakistan Bureau of Statistics and their presence is felt on every forum and every aspect of life.

It appears successive governments have ignored the incidents and violence towards the religious minorities who have faced systematic bias and intolerance for a long time.

The major example of the systematic discrimination is the negligence and misrepresentation of the religious minorities in the national curriculum.

Religious Minorities and National Curriculum of Pakistan:

Currently Pakistan has three parallel systems of education in the country —public schools, private schools, and *madrassas* (seminaries).

There are hundreds of thousands of non-Muslim students in Pakistan who face the reality of what many analysts call a flawed education structure.

There is no diversity in the curriculum, education material is out of date and the state has been negligent in its duty to provide quality schooling. That minorities do not see themselves in the curriculum makes for an even more depressing read.

“We didn’t receive any formal education at our schools,” said Danish Shivani, a media science student at SZABIST university as he recalled how he learned nothing about Hinduism in textbooks from grade 1 to 5.

“It was our teachers’ efforts to write and collect notes for *Ramayan* teachings. They taught us about our religion completely based on their knowledge and understanding. Ironically, there was no national curriculum available for ‘other religion’ students at all,” he said.

This conversation with the 25-year-old Hindu demonstrates the lack of diversity in the country’s national curriculum.

Not long ago, when Shivani was in school, he recalls he was one of the fortunate children in Mithi, Tharparkar who had the privilege to attend a government school. Otherwise, a majority of boys his age was not pursuing an education. Many of them get themselves busy in child labor activities.

Education in Pakistan

According to the All-Pakistan Private School Federation data from 2017-2018, there are total 27,514 government schools, 197,000 private schools and 4680 madrassas across the country.

There are 131,376 government primary schools, whereas 18,753 are private schools. In 2018, according to the Federal Ministry of Education, the adult literacy rate is 70%.

Since Pakistan came into being, the predominant academic and intellectual discourse has strengthened Islamic identity with little or no reference to other religions.

The challenge with reporting on this story came from the unavailability of people in decision-making powers like at ministry levels, both in federal and provincial, to speak on this matter. Despite repeated attempts to speak to ministers, secretaries and educationists familiar with the subject, I was unable to make headway right until the filing of this report.

Nuclear physicist and renowned educationist Pervez Hoodbhoy has worked for the promotion of freedom of speech, secularism, and education in Pakistan. Explaining the current education scenario in the country, he said, “Pakistani school graduates are low-achievers. Except for ones with foreign certification, they are at the bottom end of global educational achievement.”

While religion had a role to play in this, it wasn’t the only factor, “religious instruction has had a huge presence in the Pakistani system for 40 years. But what is new is the quantum jump in the amount that is now demanded of students in ordinary schools,” he said referring to the newly announced government’s education policy called the Single National Curriculum (SNC) 2020-2021.

Single National Curriculum 2020-2021 (SNC)

The federal government says it took a step to end the education discrimination among classes (rich, poor and middle class) and presented a new education model with the SNC. The policy followed the emerging international trends in teaching, learning and assessments, which develops analytical skills, critical thinking and creativity in students.

The SNC aims to end the barrier among students from private school, a public school or a madrassa as well as provide religious education for all, including minorities in the country.

The policy's aim was - "One system of Education for all, in terms of curriculum, medium of instruction and a common platform of assessment so that all children have a fair and equal opportunity to receive high quality education." Some have called the SNC a revolutionary step in the history of education reforms in Pakistan. Others think it is flawed and unrealistic.

Hoodbhoy said, "the greatest need is for a more modern education system along the lines adopted by 95% of the world's countries. However, the PTI government has an ideological mission and the SNC is a direct reflection of that. It says it wants to create a system of education which joins up madrassas with regular schools in the hope of creating a hybrid that will create an Islamic-minded generation that is also competitive in the modern world. However, experience in Arab countries from two centuries ago tells us that this is mission impossible."

The number of madrassas boomed under the decade-long rule of Gen. Muhammad Zia ul-Haq till 1988. From an estimated 150 at Pakistan's independence in 1947, there are now some 32,000 madrassas attended by some 2.5 million students, according to Azmat Abbas, author of *Madrassah Mirage: A Contemporary History of Islamic Schools in Pakistan*. (Other estimates range as high as more than 60,000 madrassas).

According to unofficial sources, there are nearly 10,000 madrassas actively working in the country. However, there is no official data registered by the State that represents the total number of madrassas and students enrolled in them.

"Madrassas prepare the mind for life after death, but modern schools are functionally-oriented," said Hoodbhoy. "There is not a single example in any country where the two have been successfully merged. You can see how Arab countries are fast changing their curricula in favor of modern ones. Pakistan insists on going the other way."

The founding body that introduced this system, has promised that SNC is a step towards unity and will provide education in a uniform manner and also provide equal opportunities to

children, the future of the nation.

Soon after the federal government announced the SNC, policy analysts pointed out how inclusion of more Islamic teachings in the curriculum would lead to a discrimination against non-Muslim students. This stirred multiple thorny debates such as, how the state will provide qualified teachers in madrassas to teach students about English, Science and Mathematics subject or vice-versa for the schools, as how many qualified teachers will be provided for Islamiyat subject.

The discrepancies in the education for Muslims and non-Muslims manifested themselves in how they were taught about religion. For example, in the 2009 curriculum, non-Muslims took ethics instead of Islamic studies, but the SNC has introduced religious studies for five major minority groups in the country. The current government believes this move demonstrates its commitment to providing minorities its rights as well as equal opportunities.

Impact of flawed education system

Critics believe the major flaw in the current national curriculum is the absence of material on religion studies for non-Muslim students. As per the 2009 curriculum directives, they are given the choice to study Ethics, also known as Civics course, instead.

However, many non-Muslim students choose to take Islamic studies because they say they'll get a better grade. Hoodbhoy knows this, "Minorities do not matter to the PTI government. All cards are stacked up against non-Muslims, beginning from school education and onward. Non-Muslim students opt to study Islamiyat because they know that if they choose Ethics or Civics, they will get far fewer marks and thus be put at a disadvantage by examiners," he said.

Ethics/Civics course

Ethics/Civics was created as an alternative course for non-Muslim students. This includes the study of the purpose of government, the nature of law, the way private behavior affects public order, social studies, the political system, and the international context of politics.

On the other hand, Muslims learn about ethics, governance and etiquettes in Islamiyat books. Hoodbhoy said the situation is even worse for the minorities because they study Islamic materials even in Urdu, English, and Science subjects. "This is contrary to what Article 22 of the Constitution says. However, the unofficial response from people in government is that they are not bothered by what the law says. Instead, they sometimes remark that if non-Muslims don't like this system, why don't they leave the country?"

Not only Shivani, but a Christian student from a privileged background in Karachi faced discrimination once he began high school. Naveed Shehbaz, a master's student at Iqra university said, "I received my primary education from St. Paul's Catholic School, Karachi. As it is a missionary community school, I faced no difficulty or discrimination between Grade I – VIII. It is a convent so there was obviously no religion barrier. I studied Christianity with complete freedom or rather I studied my religion with proper schooling."

Shehbaz, now 28, said the situation changed when he was promoted to class 9 – and was introduced to the ethics course. Just like the Intermediate level "there was no option available for other faith students to study their religion but continue with Ethics or Civics subject."

Shehbaz narrated his experience which was similar to other Christian students until he

surprised me by saying he studied Islamic studies in Intermediate – “for good marks obviously,” he said in a casual manner.

Shehbaz revealed how non-Muslims are systematically forced to study about Islamiyat in Urdu and English subjects. Forcing the minorities to study Islamic studies is nothing but a clear violation of the Constitution of Pakistan.

What does the Constitution say?

The Constitution of Pakistan provides the right to freedom of religion or belief in Article 20 of the Fundamental Rights chapter. It says every citizen has the right to practice and propagate their religion. On the rights of religious minorities in education Article 22 of the Constitution says: “No person attending any educational institution shall be required to receive religious instruction, or take part in any religious ceremony, or attend religious worship, if such instruction, ceremony or worship relates to a religion other than his own.”

Article 36 specifically speaks to the protection of minorities and maintains “the State shall safeguard the legitimate rights and interests of minorities, including their due representation in the Federal and Provincial services.” Individuals from religious minorities are entitled, as equal citizens, to equal protection by law. However, the failure of providing them adequate education has resulted in discrimination for religious minorities.

Introduction of Ethics/Civics course for other non-Muslims

The Ethics/Civics course was intended to fulfill the Article 22 requirement for religious minorities in schools. It is still inaccessible to students in many parts of the country as there are no books and reading material available.

Furthermore, the Ethics course is dominated with the reflection of Islamic studies. Pakistani physicist and author Dr. Abdul Hameed Nayyar said the problem was that ethics too is taught from an Islamic point of view. “All the good ethical values are being presented under Islamic point of view,” he said.

He highlighted previous efforts to initiate reforms in the education system. “There was a time when educationists suggested teaching comparative religion to minorities. The problem was that the selected teachers were more interested in talking about Islam than other religion. It was more like a counterproductive exercise,” he explained.

“The majority of my teachers were Hindu. We were taught civics/ethics in IX grade, but we had no books. We were only given photocopy of the notes, prepared by previous students. There was no material available to study ethics at all in our schools,” he added.

Shivani also recalled how he, along with other students, carried out a protest in 2010, in District Mithi demanding their basic rights of education. “There was no education content available for the Hinduism class neither for ethics/civics subject. Ethics was overshadowed by Islamic teachings. Our community students were forced to study Islamic studies so we could secure good marks for our future education,” said Shivani. Sadly, his protest didn’t make any huge impact to wake up the authorities over this critical issue.

Nayyar, who has taught physics at the Lahore University of Management Sciences, Ali Institute of Education Lahore, and Sustainable Development Policy Institute, Islamabad, has written extensively on the history of education in the country and rights for minorities; he has also written on the systematic conversion of religious minorities through education system.

“Over the years, there has been some change in the education policies and simultaneously no, there has been not enough change. It is a fact that religious minorities are not being taught about their religion at schools as compared to Muslims who formally study Islamic studies.”

He continued to elaborate how “the minorities don’t get that chance to protest the discrimination which is fine because they are not rich in number and separate classes cannot be organized for them. For that reason, one thing had been decided that they should be taught Ethics.”

Sikhs too have faced difficulties in their schooling. Kuldeep Khan, a media science student from SZABIST and freelancer cinematographer, seemed resigned to the dismal state of affairs as he described his childhood and early education.

“We have been trained this way to stay silent,” he said. This is the best way to avoid any conflict. I have lived my entire childhood in Khairpur, and I wasn’t very religious in my family so all I remember, was going with our parents to *Gurdwaras* when I around 13-year-old but not after that.”

Khan, 25, wears his long hair in a ponytail and not the traditional turban. He says he is not a religious man, so he feels wearing a turban is an additional weight added to his personality.

His seemingly blasé attitude gave the impression that he belongs to a community that is so oppressed that they have forgotten to fight for their rights. “Yes! discrimination is there. But our people aren’t aware of that unfairness. They do not want to raise a voice against discrimination.

Jaisa hai waisa hi chalne do,” he said.

He said that he has witnessed many Sikhs, keeping their voices low to avoid any conflict with Muslims. “Many minorities have migrated from interior Sindh due to safety concerns,” he added.

He seemed frustrated with the situation and said, “the difference is visible. The difference is right here. The discrete is visible. We don’t have any identity in national curriculum. A Muslim is either a *Sunni* or *Shia*. They have the name, but we are either Muslim or non-Muslim. We don’t get to be called by our name, our identity.”

The 2011 U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) annual report (Centre for Social Justice (CSJ), 2020) found that textbooks used in Pakistani primary and secondary schools encourage the development of intolerance towards religious minorities, especially Hindus and Christians. Moreover, textbooks contain stories, biographies, and poems with an Islamic religious character that students of minority faiths must study.

Nayyar also stated that, “the lessons on the life of Mahatma Gandhi were taught until the 60s in school. Lessons and history with broad perspective was taught on his personality. However, now we only learn about Muslim national and historical heroes.”

Pakistan’s Hindu community constitutes around 1.6% of the population, with the majority living in Sindh. Over time many Hindus migrated to India due to the rise in discrimination and religious polarization. Many belong to the working class, live in poverty, and are forced to change their names to avoid conflicts.

Only a non-Muslim can answer what it feels like to be a minority in a predominantly Muslim state, many non-Muslims have this perception that because they belong to a different community or group, they will not be provided with equal opportunities. That has certainly been Danish and Shehbaz’s experience.

But there are some who took it as a challenge to make their presence felt. Rabia Tufail from Karachi is one such young, energetic journalist, who is a Christian.

About her education, she echoed others’ sentiments about no equal opportunities available for minorities. “I completed my matriculation and like any other concerned family, my parents suggested I continue Intermediate in commerce education. After that I pursued my bachelor’s in

B. Com and applied for an entry level banking job,” she said.

Tufail’s family was worried – like many non-Muslims families are – that they won’t get a

fair shot. Tufail's parents told their daughter it is better to focus on a career that will secure her future financially.

26 year-old Tufail is now working as a female reporter for a private news channel. "It is an achievement for me," she said, "being a Christian girl, I appear on TV as a news reporter. We proved that we could do whatever we want. We can do all the hard work."

She stated lack of education has been a problem in the Christian community over the years. "Over generations, the perception is built that we are minorities and we have been discriminated. However, I faced a very positive and healthy environment; I witnessed the change in attitude and acceptance among the colleagues for my religion," she said.

"From my experience in banking, which was very positive and welcoming, I have faced discrimination in my career later as a reporter, I have covered many other communities' events. Though situation is not that bad as compared to India, they treat Muslims more brutally," she added.

Urdu – English (compulsory subjects) dominated by Islamic content

Islam makes its presence felt in all subjects, not just religious studies. For example, the compulsory Urdu language textbook for grade 1 -10, which is compulsory for all students has strong Islamic orientation in the chapter and poems, without any depiction of Pakistan's religious minorities or their beliefs.

Nayyar has written about this and also raised the question in front of the SNC founding committee at the early founding stage of the curriculum. "Teachings of *Hamd o Naat* in compulsory subjects is completely out of context," he said. "We raised the questions on this point. Our constitution, Article 21 clearly states that no student should be taught of other religion."

He added how this wasn't the first time he raised this point but in previous education reforms in 2009, he asked why religion was included in compulsory courses meant for every student, Muslims and non-Muslims. "We raised this issue in 2003. We claimed this point in front of the founding body of the SNC that religious content should be removed from literature books (compulsory subjects), and they firmly rejected our point."

He added, "The founding committee said that it will create a havoc in the country if we remove *Hamd o Naat* from Urdu books, as the committee or the authoritative members were too scared of religious intolerance."

Peter Jacob, who is the executive director of Centre of Social Justice, has been part of a Working Group on Inclusive Education, (Asghar & Yasin, 2021) which has examined the new model (SNC) textbooks for the first five grades for English and Urdu. “We noted with disappointment that model textbooks are maintaining the religious content of the majority religion in Pakistan which is a violation of Article 22 (1) of the constitution of Pakistan. The drafters of new textbooks seem to have shown little regard to the constitution or rights of religious minorities or the idea of respecting religious diversity in the country,” he said.

He added that while discrimination against minorities needs to be tackled, the bigger question is to ask how the SNC will impact the nation as a whole. “Despite all efforts, the negative potential of curriculum as well as textbooks that failed our education system and policies in the past has not been removed. So, the challenges to quality learning for our future generation remain,” he said.

Although the SNC has added a course on religious studies which will replace ethics, Jacob said this will give children belonging to other faiths an option to study their own religion. “While this is expected to contribute an element of religious diversity in the school environment, the content of *Islamiat* for Muslim students has been increased exponentially,” he added.

The sense of being oppressed in a Muslim dominant state is visible but there is a portion of non- Muslims who have a different take on discrimination.

Sheba Sultan is a lecturer in Punjab University, says there is no harm in teaching Islamic-reflected content in compulsory subjects such as Urdu and English.

Sultan, who is a Christian, agreed there is no will for providing the religious minorities with a better option as they are given ethics to study. Most of the children of different faiths learn about their religion from their parents. Sultan thinks that “the positive aspect is that from childhood, parents must tell their children that they are living in a country which is predominantly Muslim, and they will come in contact with Islam and its teachings.”

She proposed that it is not a negative thing to learn about Islam and historic Muslim personalities. “For example, *Hamd*, it is about praising *Allah*. *Naat* is also about praising the Holy Prophet (pbuh). It isn’t offensive. Things are taken in stride. It isn’t offensive at all. Neither is it a problem that ‘oh god our child is learning about Islam.’ Schools celebrate *milaad* and Christmas as well.”

Sultan, 37, received her early education from St Joseph’ Convent in Karachi. She

completed her education and pursued her Masters in English literature from University of Salford, U.K in 2008.

Sultan plans on studying further about linguistics and reiterated a Christian student learning about Islam should not be seen as a matter of religious intolerance. However, when she was asked about the new reforms of the SNC, she said, “If it’s too good to be true... it is socialism, this uniformity. It is very restrictive kind of studies for Muslims?”

Sultan believes Muslims should learn about other faiths too. “It is interesting when we learn a new language or a different cultural norm from different societies,” she said. “It would be a positive approach for Muslims to learn about other faiths. This will broaden their perception building and can make them more tolerant towards other faith believers.”

But her sentiment isn’t shared by other Christians like, for example, Tufail. The reporter said SNC is nothing but a mere approach to bring uniformity in the society. “I remember I chose to study *Islamiyat*, just to secure good marks. The option available for Christian students to study ethics was of no use. The SNC policy is a good step on paper only. It will not be implemented on the ground. There are no ethics books available for grade 1 – 8. The systematic way of teaching minorities about their own religion is to provide the authenticate material,” she added.

The problems are not confined to teaching Islamic reflected education to minorities but the systematic conversion of evolving hatred through textbooks is also there.

Negative portrayal of religious minorities in Pakistan Studies textbooks

Pakistan and social studies textbooks are extensively filled with misinformation related to Partition. There are negative comments regarding India and Great Britain, but Hindus are often singled out for particular criticism.

According to the National Commission for Justice and Peace (NCJP) 2013 report: “Government issued textbooks teach students that Hindus are backward and superstitious, and given a chance, they would assert their power over the weak, especially, Muslims, depriving them of education by pouring molten lead in their ears...”

The portrayal of Sikhs is also negative. Events are recorded in Pakistan Studies and history books for class 9 and 10 which say things like Sikh soldiers insulted Muslim women and killed their children. As a Pakistani Sikh, Khan said he has faced discrimination because of his religion. Though he doesn’t consider himself a religious man, he faced the discriminatory behavior in the

society.

“We face intolerance in people’s behavior.” He recalled the time he faced difficulties when he was looking for a place to live in Karachi in 2011. “During my house hunt, I met different families who were happy to provide me house on rent but right after they got to know I am Sikh, many of them called off the deal. Because somewhere they had read in the books that Sikhs are bad people,” he shared.

“The privileged class of our community (Sikh) has decided to stay quiet to avoid the religious conflicts. But the history in the textbooks is also fractured. For example, the history and events mentioned about 1947 Partition tells us the story that Sikhs and Hindus raped and killed Muslim women. That is the main reason of intolerance in the society,” said Khan.

Sharing his views on the historical perception building in the history books, following events such as Partition 1947 against Hinduism and Sikhism, Jacob said, “I have been pointing out concerns by civil society about hate material against the religious minorities and glorification of wars, but these concerns are yet to be addressed. We will continue to make recommendations to ally concern fully and objectively. I have requested the Ministry of Federal Education to prepare guidelines for the authors about avoiding hate speech in textbooks.”

Nayyar and Ahmed Salim carried out a detailed study “The Subtle Subversion: The State of Curricula and Textbooks in Pakistan” in 2003 that reported that the rights of religious minorities—while partially codified in the Constitution of 1973—are not protected by the state. While Islam, by being promoted as a dominating force, is often made to encroach upon their lives.

According to the study, the curricula of the public-school system reflect this reality, exhibiting many points of concern. In particular, Nayyar and Salim’s research found the following: insensitivity to the existing religious diversity of the nation; incitement to militancy and violence; encouragement of prejudice, bigotry, and discrimination towards religious minorities; glorification of war and use of war against non-Muslims; blaming other religions for repression and cruelty; factual inaccuracies; omissions of historical events; and lack of positive values of other religions.

Additionally, their research also found the importance of Islamic teaching as well as the Islamic nature of Pakistan was emphasized, while hatred was espoused towards Hindus and Indians. It was noted that these themes were especially prevalent in the subjects of Urdu and Social Studies, as well as English. While this study focuses in detail on the content being taught in the public- school curriculum and textbooks, it focuses less on the link between such rhetoric and the

actual behavior of Pakistanis who go through the education system.

According to Jacob, amid all this, SNC may pave the way for tolerance in the curriculum. “The alternative arrangement of teaching Ethics to non-Muslim students, was so impractical that most of the minority students (over 80 % at Matric level and over 90 at intermediate level) were forced to study Islamiyat.”

“Now there will be an option to study at least five minority religions however the Islamic content in other compulsory subject remains as such which the minority student will have to study and take exams for,” he said.

Dr. Ali Usman Qasmi, history professor at LUMS, shared his opinion that how as an educationist he sees the SNC as ‘revolutionary step’ by the current government of Pakistan.

Qasmi questioned the policy SNC is offering for non-Muslim students of teaching religion other than Ethics course. “Whose interpretation is going to be privileged for religion studies. Because no rigorous instructions are given whether it is Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, or Sikhism,” he said.

He was asked whether compulsory subjects in national curriculum are filled with Islamic content and information, adding that shouldn’t be the case as other faiths have great literature that can be taught in schools.

“According to my point of view Urdu as a subject, as literature has a very rich tradition in which religion has been very significant. For example, one cannot possibly teach Urdu without teaching *Marsiya* (essentially religious, an elegiac form of poetry written to honor and remember the martyrs of Karbala). It is a strong tradition and teaching *Marsiya* requires some kind of engagement with Islamic history.”

He continued, “in a way it is similar to an argument made by missionary school in the 19th century that one of the reasons they wanted to introduce English language was because they thought one cannot teach English without teaching the Bible. The argument was how can they teach ‘Paradise Lost’ without any reference to Bible.

“But in case of Urdu, I would say that it is alright that *Marsiya* teaching is important not in religious proclamation but because it is part of Urdu literary tradition. But then I would argue that in Urdu there has been a substantial contribution by non-Muslim authors, even Muslim authors talking about Hindu mythology and Urdu translation of *Bahgwat Geeta*, *Vades* and *Mahabharata*. So, to say that Urdu has one specific kind or religious mythology which deals with the Islam is

absolutely incorrect.”

Qasmi suggested teaching Hindu mythology as well since the curriculum is forcing the teaching of *Marsiya* in Urdu. “In that way it will no longer be unconstitutional and religiously indoctrination but a genuine kind of an appreciation of Urdu literary traditions and the multiplicity of those traditions,” he added.

Not just in Urdu or English but Qasmi explained the education structure is majorly based on Islamic teachings. He said that every other discipline is being taught under the light of Islamic history as a referent. Islamic ethos is inevitably going to reflect in its education policies, and it is shaped in a way that no one can question that. It is unfortunate that whatever spaces were available for non-Muslims specially through which they could have done some kind of community building, those space have happened to deny to them. “It is not essential to read Muslim contribution in Physics, Chemistry and Mathematics to understand various concepts or to understand creationism with the reference of Quranic verses,” he said.

Apart from Jinnah’s words for an inclusive country and constitutional guarantee of equality, the state has now initiated the political commitment of policy-making for the rights of religious minorities of the country. While many young individuals like Shivani and Khan have shared their experience of facing discrimination in the country, Tufail has been a lucky person to achieve her career goals based on her talent in a diverse profession of journalism. With the SNC, Sultan believes that there will be a better tomorrow for her community, where there will be more tolerance and acceptance towards other religions in Pakistan.

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