

THE EXPERIENCE OF BEING A MINORITY GROUP MEMBER: THE CASE OF FOUR CHRISTIAN STUDENTS IN PAKISTAN

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Abstract

Students of religious minorities face problems in accessing education. The element of discrimination as faced by the religious minorities in the field of education is reported by research. This narrative case study aims at exploring the school-through-university experiences of four Christian students (2 male and 2 female) in Pakistan. The purpose of the study is three-fold: (a) to explore the challenges experienced by the minority students studying in the mainstream education system in Pakistan (b) to find out similarities and differences in their experiences (c) to explore the ways in which these students coped with those problems. The study revealed that several challenges faced by the respondents, were due to their religious minority status. These included issues in social adjustment with their teachers and peer group especially at the school level; pressure from peer students belonging to the majority religious group and teachers to follow their ideas; and instances of discrimination by teachers and classmates. Findings also indicated that the respondents faced more bias at the school level but the perceived bias seemed to have receded gradually as they went up the education ladder through college and university. The respondents' common resistance strategies against discrimination included keeping quiet, remaining less active and becoming back-benchers in their classes. The study suggests need for curricular changes for developing sensitivity and recognition of minorities' issues in educational institutions and for changes in teacher training in the country.

Key words

Minority issues, Christian students, educational experiences, curriculum in Pakistan.

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Introduction and Background

Diversity has been an important concept in education in different countries and cultures around the world.¹ Pakistan is a country of diverse cultures and a society with various ethnic and religious minorities. Major religious minorities include Christians, Hindus and Sikhs. Pakistan's minority Christian students face innumerable challenges in their studies such as instances of discriminatory attitude of teachers and classmates, and non-inclusive curriculum at various stages of the education system. The textbooks are generally not balanced in terms of representing different religious groups in the society.² Like many other developing countries where "racial and ethnic tensions"³ and communal violence are commonly observed, higher education institutions in Pakistan are often organized and managed in ways that disadvantage some groups.⁴ In Pakistani colleges and universities, various political and religious organizations are formed and managed by the students. For instance, Peoples Students Federation, Islami Jamiat-e-Tulaba, and Pakhtun Students Federation are a few examples. Students with some sort of affiliation with a certain organization are welcomed to join. However, organizations representing religious minority students are not very common in educational institutions.

There have been instances of teachers labeling and treating students based on their social background, ethnicity and faith, which sometimes creates tensions among minority students.⁵ Discrimination based on race, ethnicity or religion is not only harmful but also affects their educational outcomes, personality, identity and behavior. It works against effective classroom communication, limits some students' contribution and promotes tension and conflict among students.⁶

Minority students may feel unsettled when the beliefs of home and educational institutions differ. Under such conditions, it is hardly possible for them to take an active part in educational activities. Such students face a number of issues that hamper the way of their normal educational process. Fold identified absenteeism, ridicule, disruption and the 'wall of silence' as common resistance tactics practiced by minority students.⁷ Such resistance tactics not only make students less confident but also promote a negative attitude towards their fellow students.

The above review shows that the minority students' issue carries significant importance in terms of the aims, process and outcomes of education. This also comes in the fold of human rights and the rights of all citizens without discrimination on ethnic, gender or religious lines. According to articles 20-A, 22-1 and 25-1 of the Constitution of Pakistan, citizens have the equal right to study their

religion. However, the education department has yet to introduce separate curriculum for religious minority students to study in government schools and to appoint teachers to teach religion to these students.⁸The current study, therefore, is of substantial importance in terms of its possible role to highlight the problems faced by students representing a section of a religious minority in Pakistan.

In the following sections, a brief background on the system of education in Pakistan is presented. This is followed by a detailed section on the research methodology. Following this, participants' stories and discussion sections are presented which is followed by a section on conclusion and implications.

System of Education in Pakistan

Formal education in Pakistan is provided by the public and private sectors as well as the madrassa/seminary (religious school system). Public sector schools follow the curriculum prescribed by the Pakistan Ministry of Education. Urdu, the national language of the country is the medium of instruction in a majority of public sector schools. There is no uniformity in the curriculum of privately run schools and the various private sector schools follow curricula of their own choice. Similarly, these institutions have set their own criteria for the selection and appointment of teachers.

The government emphasizes free and universal education for all in its educational policies. Article 25-A of the constitution of Pakistan (1973) states: "The state shall provide free and compulsory education to all children between the age of five and sixteen years in such a manner as may be determined by law." Yet, the general literacy rate in Pakistan is only 56.20% (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO, 2008]. One of the gaps, also addressed in the National Education Policy (NEP) 2009, is the violation of the principle of uniformity.⁹ This is like the education system in the US that does not have a uniform schooling across the states; for example, there are traditional public and private schools, magnet schools, charter schools, boarding schools, parochial schools, single sex schools and Christian Missionary Schools etc. Similarly, in Pakistan, although it is mandated in the constitution of Pakistan to provide free and compulsory quality education to all children between the ages of 5-16; yet, the government has failed in this endeavor resulting in the origination of privately owned schools including madrassas, Christian Missionary schools, as well as schools run by business entrepreneurs and non-governmental organizations.

Since the independence of Pakistan, the Christian Missionary schools have been playing a significant role in educating the population. In their research, Okoye and Pongou (2014) state that the continuing effect of missionary activities was not specific to religion, and that the Muslims exposed to missionary activities have significantly higher levels of schooling.¹⁰ It must then be assumed that the Christian population must have easy access to quality education but sadly, it is the contrary. The concentration of missionary schools; namely, Presentation Convent, Convent of Jesus and Mary, and St. Mary's are mostly limited to the urban areas serving only a small portion of the Christian student population. In a report titled A Survey Report of Low-cost schools for Christians in Pakistan (2016), a survey of 604 Christian Schools in the province of Punjab, with the addition of Islamabad Capital Territory and Karachi, revealed that these schools had inadequate resources for the deprived community.¹¹ The challenges ranged from untrained, minimally qualified teachers to the unavailability of text books and school facilities. One advantage that these schools had was the freedom to incorporate the teachings of Bible in their curriculum. 93% of the surveyed schools had some form of Bible teaching. Instances such as these are a constant reminder that the education system has categorically denied the rights of the non-Muslim citizens of Pakistan and have vandalized the ethnic and religious diversity that Pakistan could have boosted for becoming an inclusive society. In the chapter IV of the NEP 2009 the policy states, "Provision shall be made for teaching of the subject of Ethics/Moral Education in lieu of Islamiyat to non-Muslim children and subject specific teachers shall be appointed according to the requirements".¹² However, this is not being practiced and many minority students end up studying the subject of Islamiyat as their Muslim fellows. The Ethics course is an amalgamation of the teachings of Hinduism, Christianity, and Sikhism, etc. which does not qualify as religious education in accordance with their respective faiths. Christian Missionary schools though have the convenience of teaching religious education to Christian students, but continually struggle to provide services to a larger population.

Methodology

The current study adopted qualitative narrative design in which a research problem is explored by understanding the experiences of an individual(s).¹³ Narrative researchers describe the lives of individuals by collecting and telling stories about people's lives, and write narratives of individual experiences.¹⁴ According to Creswell "Narrative research focuses on the micro analytic picture of individuals' stories rather than the broader picture of cultural norms. As a distinct form of qualitative

research, it focuses on collection of stories, reporting individual experiences, and discussing the meaning of those experiences for the individuals.”¹⁵ In narrative studies, chronology of an individual’s experiences is analyzed and reported by the narrative researchers. In this way, the researchers elicit information about a participant’s past, present and future experiences.¹⁶ Understanding the experiences of teachers and students is important in education as it draws on the philosophical thoughts of John Dewey who emphasizes individual experiences as central lens for understanding a person.¹⁷ This seemed the most appropriate design for this study as it aims to explore the school through university experiences of religious minority students. It also aims at highlighting the attitude of teachers towards minority students during instructional program.

Participants

Four Christian minority students, two males and two females participated in the study. All the participants had completed their masters. One female participant had a Master’s degree in Political Science while the other in Economics. Similarly, one male participant had completed Master’s in the subject of Philosophy while the other had a degree in Computer Science. Two respondents (one male and one female) were enrolled in the Masters of Education (M.Ed) at a university in Peshawar, a city in the north-west of Pakistan. Similarly, one female was also enrolled in a Bachelor of Education (B.Ed) program in the same institution. Participants were selected using purposive sampling which allows the researchers to look for cases that could provide rich information and make an in-depth study possible.¹⁸ During the sampling process, characteristics, such as age, social and economic background, and the level of education were considered. All the respondents were aged 22-24, and belonged to lower middle-class families.

The participants were assured that all the information would be kept confidential and pseudonyms would be used. All the respondents voluntarily shared their experiences. The data from the three respondents, enrolled in the teacher training institute, were collected at the completion of their training.

The respondents were given pseudonyms: Ms. Kiran, Ms. Gul, Mr. Waqar and Mr. Kamran. Kiran, one of the respondents was educated in a school in which most teachers and students were Christians. Her parents were university employees, working as cleaners in one of the departments of the university. They had residence inside the university campus, a place where most residents were Christians. Her two sisters and one brother were also receiving

education. Gul's parents were also working as sweepers/cleaners in another institute of the university. They also had residence inside the university campus. Gul had two brothers and two sisters. Waqar's father had a small business and his mother was a homemaker. He had residence in Peshawar Saddar (a place in Peshawar Cantonment) and had one sister and two brothers. Mr. Kamran's father was working as a clerk in a hospital; he had one sister and two brothers all of them were studying.

Data collection and Analysis

Data were collected mainly through field texts; a form of stories gathered by the researcher through interviews or informal conversation.¹⁹ Field texts enable narrative researchers to gain in-depth knowledge of the respondents' life experiences²⁰. Data through field texts were collected at the work places of the respondents. The purpose of the interview, the aim of research and the interview questions were duly shared with the respondents a day before its outset. An Urdu (The national language of Pakistan which is also the medium of instruction in mainstream Pakistani educational institutions) translation of the questions was also provided for the ease of the respondents. This was done because the respondents could communicate better in Urdu than in English. The interview questions focused mainly on aspects like the attitude of Muslim classmates and teachers towards minority students, the main problems faced by minority students and their resistance tactics.

The data analysis process was guided by the work of Braun and Clark.²¹ The process began with transcribing and translating the interviews. Each interview was listened carefully three times before transcribing. All the interviews were then translated into English. It was an essential first step in gaining an overview of the data. Careful listening to the interviews, translating and transcribing enabled the researcher to familiarize with the data²². Once all the interviews were transcribed and translated, it was shared with the participants for checking and negotiating the meaning for validity. This was followed by retelling the stories.²³ After retelling all the stories, themes were identified. At this stage, a thematic map was developed and extracts of relevance from coded data were collated within themes. All the themes were then categorized in a chronological order. Participants' experiences were categorized by looking critically at the comments they made and their ability to face critical situations.

STORIES

Kiran's story

Kiran began her education in a school in which most teachers were Christians, although students from various ethnic groups studied there, they remained cooperative with minority students. Kiran was active in curricular as well as co-curricular activities in school years. In college, the attitude of the teachers was usually free of bias yet there were some exceptions. For example, the attitude of teacher of Islamic Studies was harsh towards her.

Kiran stated that some of the students often tried to degrade her by making unpleasant comments about her religion and by ignoring her in classroom activities. Some students urged her to convert to their religion, the religion of the majority. Whenever, she was teased by her classmates or teachers, and she used to keep quiet and preferred to sit at the back of the classroom.

Since co-curricular activities were not encouraged in the college, she could not take part in it. However, Kiran's university experience was better than her school experience as she enjoyed her university years. Kiran attended two departments, one for academic studies, and the other a teacher training institute (professional). In both, the attitude of the teachers and students was good. The Muslim students were very cooperative and polite towards minority students. Although Kiran was the only minority student in her class, her classmates did not show any discrimination towards her and all of them treated her in a friendly fashion. She achieved a good standing in the department. After doing masters, she took admission in B.Ed (Bachelors of Education) and enjoyed her experience as a prospective teacher.

It was largely due to her classmates and teachers' encouragement that she took active part in curricular as well as co-curricular activities and let her potential develop.

The story of Gul

Gul was educated in a public sector (government run) school in which almost all the teachers and students were Muslim. She was not the only Christian student as there were a few other Christian students in the school as well. Students and teachers remained cooperative and nice with minority students, except for two boys who often teased Gul for her religious faith. They often came up with harsh comments such as, "she is Christian, don't sit with her". Gul used to keep quiet during such situations. Similarly, sometimes she was physically manhandled by the teacher of Islamic studies for her inability to learn the lessons taught by that teacher.

In college years, she participated actively in co-curricular activities and received appreciation of her teachers and the principal, which she did not receive in her school days. However, according to her, the behavior of the Islamic Studies teacher was unpleasant as she, in her lectures, repeatedly reminded her students that people other than Muslims will go to hell. However, rest of the teachers were nice. Gul's university experience was also good and she feels no discrimination on the part of the teachers. They always tried to let Gul speak and take part in curricular as well as co-curricular activities. The attitude of her classmates was also friendly and comforting.

The story of Waqar

Waqar received his early education in a public-sector school in which he was the only Christian student. He had a unique experience from those of other respondents. He mentioned that everything was okay until his Muslim classmates did not discover that he was Christian by faith. However, the moment they came to know, their attitude totally changed. Waqar shared that he faced negative attitude and irritating questions from his teachers and fellow students such as; why doesn't he convert to Islam? Why doesn't he follow a religious book? His teachers and senior fellow students used to urge him to read Islamic material which was a part of the course and no other optional subject was available. The same situation was also faced by him in the college where not only the teacher of Islamic studies but also of other subjects treated him as an alien. In college, he always tried to answer teachers' questions but they usually ignored his responses. None of the teachers ever encouraged him.

Similarly, he faced group criticism from his fellow students too. As an active student, he participated in dramas, sports, debates and national song competitions. He was only encouraged by two teachers who themselves did not belong to the majority Muslim sect. He further narrated that under his captaincy, the school won the cricket competition but at the prize distribution ceremony, he was not allowed to hold the winning cup rather two Muslims students were given the opportunity to receive the award. Sometimes, some teachers used the word '*Kafir*' translated as a '*non-believer*', for Christians, which was insulting for him. Before enrolling in formal school and college, he was told by his parents that he might face discrimination and criticism by his fellow students and teachers. Therefore, he was mentally prepared for it. However, his university experience was good and he felt no discrimination from students and teachers there. Teachers and students at the university remained highly cooperative and free of prejudice. He enjoyed his days at the university.

The story of Kamran

Kamran was a good student in the school. He was liked by his teachers but there was a distance between him and other students because he was a religious minority student. Sometimes, teachers ignored him during classroom discussion and other activities. His college experience was average. He felt a little unsettled in the beginning. Due to his minority status, he did not make many friends. However, the attitude of the students and teachers were not that hostile. Kamran had a wonderful university experience. The attitude of the teachers, especially at the teacher training institute was admirable. Teachers and students at the teacher training institute, according to him, were broad minded, cooperative and encouraging. They encouraged Kamran to speak and share his ideas with his fellow students. They also encouraged him to take part in co-curricular activities. Teachers at the university never asked questions about his religion. They were found focusing on their duties as subject teachers. They treated all the students alike without taking into consideration their religious backgrounds or affiliations. Teachers' encouraging remarks enabled Kamran to take active part in co-curricular activities like debates, drama and sports.

Findings

This section presents findings emerged from the stories of participants regarding their school through university experiences. These findings are put under five themes including the attitude of teachers at school and college; the attitude of students at school and college; friendly teachers and class fellows at university; parents' role; and resistance strategies. The detail is presented below:

Attitude of teachers at school and college

The data reveal that the attitude of majority of teachers at school and college towards minority students was overall good yet there were teachers who usually teased them with their harsh words and biased attitude. Particularly, the attitude of teachers of Islamic Studies was highly biased towards minority students. For instance, one of the participants stated:

In school, teachers remained cooperative with minority students. Similarly, in college, the attitude of the teachers was usually free of bias yet there were some exceptions. I personally felt that all students were equal for them [the teachers], they entered the class, delivered lectures and left but sometimes a teacher of

Islamic studies used harsh words for minority students.
(Respondent 1)

Likewise, another respondent shared that sometimes she was physically mishandled by the teacher of Islamic Studies for her inability to learn the lessons in Islamic Studies. As she stated:

Teacher of Islamic Studies always wanted me to read Islamic material and respond to her questions the way she used to do with Muslim students, but for me it was difficult because of my [different] religious faith.
(Respondent 4)

Similarly, describing college experience, another respondent shared:

Teacher of Islamic Studies was not good as she used to come up with comments like, “people other than Muslims will go to hell”. But the rest of the teachers were nice. (Respondent 2)

One of the respondents faced negative attitude and irritating questions from some of his teachers at school and college such as “why don’t you convert to Islam?” The data also show that although majority of the Muslim teachers did not show any discrimination towards minority students; yet sometimes, minority students felt being ignored by them in classroom discussions and related activities. As one respondent articulated that:

In school and college, I always tried to answer teachers’ questions but hardly remember if any teacher had ever encouraged me. I was encouraged by only two teachers who did not belong to the majority Muslim sect (Respondent 2)

Attitude of students at school and college

Regarding the attitude of students/class fellows at school, it was revealed from the stories that Minority students faced criticism from their fellow students because of their religious status. For example, one of the respondents shared:

Everything was okay until my Muslim classmates did not know I was a Christian, the moment they came to know, their attitude totally changed. (Respondent 3)

The same respondent was also asked irritating questions by his class mates and senior colleagues regarding his faith. For example, why didn’t he embrace Islam and follow the teaching of a particular religious book? Sometimes, teachers and students forced him to read Islamic studies which were difficult for him as he stated:

Teachers and senior fellow students used to urge me to read Islamic material which was a part of the course and no other optional subject was available.(Respondent 3)

Similarly, other respondents were also criticized by their class mates for their religion. For instance, one respondent stated that “some of her class mates degrade her by bullying and by ignoring her in class room activities.” (Respondent 1) The data also revealed that due to class mates’ biased attitude, respondents felt a distance between them and other students. Some class mates even urged the respondents to convert to their religion; the religion of the majority.

Friendly teachers and class fellows at university

Although respondents felt a little unsettled in school and college yet their university experience was very good. Teachers at the university were cooperative and free of prejudice towards minority students. They never came up with religion-related questions. The stories revealed that university teachers treated all students alike irrespective of their religious or ethnic background. They encouraged all students to take part in co-curricular activities equally. Consequently, the respondents took active part in curricular as well as co- curricular activities. For instance, one of the respondents shared:

The attitude of teachers and students at the university was good. The Muslim students were very cooperative and polite towards me. Although I was the only minority student in my class, my classmates did not show any discrimination towards me and all of them treated me equally. As a result, I achieved a good standing in the department.’ (Respondent 1)

Likewise, another respondent stated:

The attitude of the teachers, especially at the university were admirable, they were broad minded, cooperative and encouraging.’ (Respondent 4)

The attitude of teachers at the teacher training institute, which was attended by three of the respondents were particularly good. Their attitude was highly stimulating towards minority students. As one of the respondents shared:

A majority of the teachers at the training institute really encouraged me and appreciated me because in my view they were aware of my faith and minority position and also knew that I was a good student.’ (Respondent1)

Likewise, another respondent said:

‘I still remember the stimulating attitude of my teachers at the teachers training institute, which enabled me to be an active member of my class.’ (Respondent 4)

Similarly, students at the university too were found friendly and cooperative. Unlike in school and college, respondents were never teased by their class mates for their minority status. They remained indifferent towards minority students’ faith and religion due to which minority students became friends with Muslim students. Their class mates never insulted or asked questions related to their faith. All this led minority students enjoy their university days at best.

Parents’ role

The data revealed that some parents have already fed their children about Muslim students and teachers’ biased attitude towards minority students. Before getting enrolled in formal school and college, their parents told them they must be prepared for discrimination and prejudice of Muslims. As one of the respondents shared:

‘I was told by my parents that I might have to face discrimination and criticism by my fellow students and teachers, so I was mentally prepared for it.’ (Respondent 3)

Resistance strategies

The stories revealed that during the school and college, when the respondents were teased by their teachers or class mates, they used to remain quiet, stayed aloof or sat at the back of the class. It was their common resistance strategies. They never argued with their class mates for being in minority or having a faith different from the majority. Similarly, in school and college years, respondents did not take active part in co-curricular activities because of the biased attitude of teachers who never encouraged minority students but discouraged them. For example, one respondent who was a skillful player of cricket and football, shared:

‘Under my captaincy, the school won the cricket competition but at the prize distribution ceremony, I was not allowed to hold the winning cup rather two Muslims students were given the opportunity to hold it. All this was very painful for me and it discouraged me.’ (Respondent 3)

Discussion

The study indicates that the respondents encountered several challenges during their studies at the school and college level of their education as religious minority students. Respondents faced adjustment problems with their teachers and peer groups especially at the school level. They also faced pressure from school and college mates and teachers belonging to the majority religious beliefs. Respondents had to study compulsory subjects including religious content other than their own. This is consistent with findings from research Ashraf that there is no separate curriculum for minority students in Pakistan.

Discrimination in terms of participation and the assignment of leadership roles was also reported. The study also indicates that the experiences of the respondents at school-through-university whereby and large similar and that the respondents' college experiences were better. They faced no such criticism as they did at the school level. The respondents, however, seemed to have enjoyed university years. The attitude of the teachers at the university seemed to be free of bias and discrimination; they encouraged the respondents to take active part in curricular and co-curricular activities. Teachers at the teachers training institute (attended by two respondents) were highly supportive. It was due to their encouragement that these students flourished academically and in terms of confidence building.

The study also reveals the common tactics the respondents used to deal with instances of discrimination. "Being quiet" or "sitting at the back" were the common resistance tactics practiced by the respondents. This finding is like research findings that identified absenteeism, ridicule, disruption and the "wall of silence" as common resistance tactics practiced by minority students.²⁴ The respondents did not enjoy their school years due to some of their teachers' and fellow students' biased attitude. They developed a negative self-image and became "quiet" students. This is harmful for the development of a balanced personality. In case the child is discouraged by unhealthy criticism, he/she is sure to develop a sense of guilt leading to hesitation and lack of initiative in planning²⁵ and carrying out life activities.²⁶ At the school and college level, the respondents had to study Islamic Studies, because there was no optional subject or a replacement subject for religious minorities such as Christians.

Conclusion and implications

This paper explored the educational experiences of selected Pakistani Christian minority students, and how this had affected their lifelong learning and thinking. The respondents faced unhealthy criticism from peer group and teachers at the school level. The bigger

reason that can be identified seems to be the lack of school teachers' and students' exposure to concepts of life in a modern, multicultural world. The teachers, especially teachers of Islamic Studies need to be trained and sensitized in order to better teach students coming from different religious backgrounds. Though the curriculum has been a factor in the creation of an unequal academic environment in the schools, the major factor seems to have been social environment of the schools in which the respondents felt unsettled. However, the respondents' experiences at the college and university seem to have been more useful and positive. Respondents rarely felt any discrimination at the university level. The attitude of the teachers and fellow students at that level seemed to have been quite positive. University experience seemed to have developed their abilities and equipped them with the skills for practical life.

The education policy needs to be more sensitive towards diversity of all forms such as culture, ethnicity, and especially religion in the Pakistani context. A reform package is necessary to bring positive change in the schools where children of every faith could get an education free of discrimination and prejudice. The school leadership needs to be sensitized towards such issues in order to treat all students equally. Teachers need to learn about the religion, culture, background and socioeconomic conditions of the students coming from diverse backgrounds. Teacher training institutions should include a component on teaching students with diverse backgrounds.²⁷ Curriculum must address the needs of the minority students. University teachers and educators can play a leading role in educating school teachers on modern lines to minimise biases. Based on the findings, it is suggested that there should be an optional subject for Christian and other minority students at the school and college level education so that they don't have to essentially study the compulsory subjects; aimed at the students from the majority religious backgrounds. School and home collaboration could also go a long way in making students broad minded and tolerant towards people from minority religious backgrounds. Co-curricular activities aimed at developing tolerance and multiculturalism could also play a significant role in bringing more inclusion and equity in the overall culture of educational institutions.

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