



The Oppression of Religious Communities in South-Asia

GA 3



Empowering Future Generations: Cultivating Global
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Issue: The Oppression of Religious Communities in South-Asia

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Introduction

The issue of religious communities in South Asia is really a complex reality, concerning a big part of the region as well as its turbulent social and religious relations. South Asia includes countries like Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Iran, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka which can vary in cultures, economies, geographies and most of the world's religions like Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, and Christianity.

Religious oppression refers to the systematic denial of rights, freedom and equality to people or communities based on their religious belief. Historical conflicts play a big role on the political agendas and nationalist ideologies, they fuel tension, minorities that face legal restrictions, social exclusion, hate crimes, and displacement. Political forces, including both state and non-state actors, can exploit religious identities to consolidate power or shift public attention, making divisions worse and making religious minorities particularly vulnerable. This discrimination and violence not only violate human rights but also undermines the social stability of South Asia's communities. Addressing religious oppression in this region is essential to helping develop peaceful existence between people and ensuring equal rights for all citizens.

Definition of Key Terms

Religious Persecution/oppression

Religious persecution can be defined as the systematic hostility or ill-treatment encountered by an individual or group because of their religious beliefs. It may be manifest in a variety of forms.¹

Communalism

A theory or system of government according to which each commune is virtually an independent state, and the nation is merely a federation of such states, or strong allegiance to one's own ethnic group rather than to society.²

Blasphemy

¹ "Religious Persecution." *Joint Public Issues Team*, 18 Aug. 2023, www.jpit.uk/issues/religious-persecution#:~:text=Religious%20persecution%20can%20be%20defined,in%20a%20variety%20of%20forms

² "Communalism Definition & Meaning." *Dictionary.Com*, Dictionary.com, www.dictionary.com/browse/Communalism Accessed 26 Nov. 2024.



Impious utterance or action concerning God or sacred things.³

Religious Divisions

Religious divisions refer to the distinctions and separations among different religious groups and sects within a society, which can lead to conflict, social tension, and challenges to political authority.⁴

Marginalisation

Marginalisation is to relegate to an unimportant or powerless position within a society or group.⁵

Sanctions

A sanction is a strong action taken in order to make people obey a law or rule, or a punishment given when they do not obey.⁶

General Overview

Brief Background Information

Religious oppression is a widespread phenomenon observed in the entirety of South-Asia, it has been influenced by years of history, colonial legacies and shifting political landscape. This region is home to a variety of religious traditions which often had to co-exist, creating frictions between communities, such as Hinduism and Islam, Buddhism, Sikhism, and Christianity, each with deep historical roots and cultural ties to each area.

Religious divisions have generally been intensified by colonial strategies of “divide and rule” which were used by British authorities, mostly in India. The partition of British India in 1947, which turned out to create India and Pakistan along with a variety of religious lines, sparked internal conflict, mass displacement, and enduring animosity between religious communities. This division caused a lot of ongoing conflict and challenges for religious minorities in both countries.

Effects on each country

In India, Hindu nationalism has increasingly shaped policies and social attitudes, most of the time to the disadvantage of Muslims, Christians, as well as other minorities and communities. There have been instances of religiously motivated violence along with the marginalisation of Muslims, specifically, has become really concerning over the recent years.

At the same time, In Pakistan, blasphemy laws and institutional biases have led to severe consequences for religious minorities, like Ahmadi Muslims, Christians, and Hindus, which

³ “Blasphemy Definition & Meaning.” *Dictionary.Com*, Dictionary.com, www.dictionary.com/browse/Blasphemy Accessed 26 Nov. 2024.

⁴ “Religious Divisions - (AP Human Geography) - Vocab, Definition, Explanations.” *Fiveable*, www.library.fiveable.me/key-terms/ap-hug/religious-divisions# Accessed 26 Nov. 2024.

⁵ “Marginalize Definition & Meaning.” *Merriam-Webster*, Merriam-Webster, www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/marginalize Accessed 26 Nov. 2024.

⁶ *Sanction | English Meaning - Cambridge Dictionary*, www.dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/sanction Accessed 26 Nov. 2024.



face discrimination, violence and persecution according to laws that place most of the Muslim population in favour.

In Bangladesh, although secular, small communities such as Hindus, Christians, and Buddhists have faced periodic violence and discrimination, usually influenced by political instability and social conservatism.

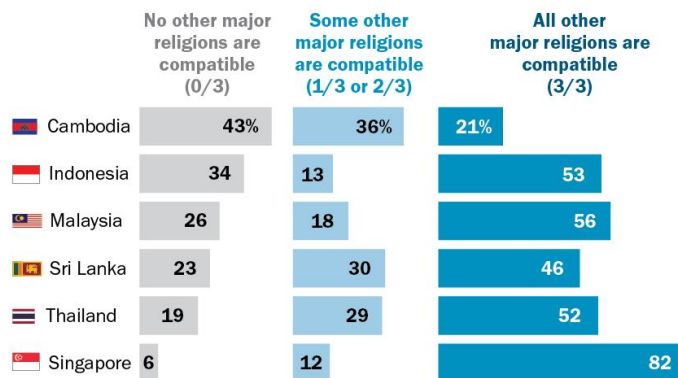
Sri Lanka, home of thousands of Buddhists, has seen a lot of tension specifically between Buddhists and Muslim minorities, with times of outbursts of violence encouraged by extremist nationalist groups.

Factors of discrimination

Factors like economics, political situations, and social acceptance can have a big impact on these kinds of patterns like religious intolerance. Different governments in the region face pressure from nationalist groups that see religious minorities as a threat to national identity. Social divides are in most cases deepened by political parties trying to use religion as a tool for gaining votes. As a result, religious minorities in South Asia struggle with limited freedoms and significant social challenges in an environment where religious identity is highly politicised. Addressing these problems is important for building a strong base for human rights, peace, and pluralism in the region.

Most in surveyed countries see other major religions as compatible with their own national culture

*% who say that Buddhism/Islam/Christianity/Hinduism are compatible with their country's culture and values**



* Respondents were not asked about the dominant religion in their own country, so Buddhism was asked about only in Indonesia and Malaysia. Islam was asked about only in Cambodia, Singapore, Sri Lanka and Thailand. This chart combines responses about the three major religions asked about in each country. Source: Survey conducted June 1-Sept. 4, 2022, among adults in six South and Southeast Asian countries. Read the Methodology for details.

"Buddhism, Islam and Religious Pluralism in South and Southeast Asia"

Pew research centre⁷

⁷ Corichi, Manolo. "How People in South and Southeast Asia View Religious Diversity and Pluralism." *Pew Research Center*, Pew Research Center, 20 Nov. 2023, www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/11/20/how-people-in-south-and-southeast-asia-view-religious-diversity-and-pluralism/



Violence and hate crimes

Violence against religious minorities is a recurring issue across South Asia, most seen in the form of mob attacks, riots, or targeted attacks. Specifically, in India there have been reported incidents of mob attacks, after allegations of cow slaughter had risen. Communal Riots like those in Delhi in 2020⁸ have targeted Muslim communities. As well as in Bangladesh, where Hindu temples and homes are often attacked during political unrest or after allegations of blasphemy, creating a climate of fear. Following, In Sri Lanka, anti-muslimism riots, like those in 2018⁹ were fuelled by nationalist propaganda, with Muslim businesses being targeted by Sinhala- Buddhist mobs.

Media and Religious Oppression

The media in South Asia plays an important role, while it highlights instances of religious oppression, it may also make tensions worse through biased reporting. Propaganda and stereotyping can cause harm, as religious minorities are portrayed negatively in mainstream media, reinforcing stereotypes, and justifying discriminatory actions. Social media platforms have been used as weapons for spreading hate speech and inciting violence against religious minorities, mostly in India and Pakistan.

History of Religious oppression

Religious oppression in South Asia is a multifaceted and complex problem which has been around centuries, shaped by waves of conquest, colonialism, political transformations and social changes that have greatly influenced inter-religious relations in the region. Ancient South Asia used to be a region of multiple religious practices, such as Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism, and eventually also came Islam through trade and conquests. This brought cultural diversity but also led to various conflicts, more specifically as the Mughal Empire established Islamic rule over a great part of India from the 16th to the 18th centuries. Along while the Mughals promoted a generally pluralistic society, tensions occasionally flared and religious identities gradually hardened.

In the beginning of the mid-18th century, during the British colonial period, the regions religious dynamics were greatly altered. To keep control the British came up with a “divide and rule” strategy, which emphasised religious differences for preventing unity between colonised populations. These political policies usually emphasized religious identities, deepening divisions between such communities, mostly between Hindus and Muslims. During

⁸ <https://www.business-standard.com/about/what-is-delhi-riots-2020#:~:text=What%20are%20Delhi%20Riots%202020,than%20200%20were%20left%20injured.>

⁹

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/mar/06/sri-lanka-declares-state-of-emergency-after-communal-violence>
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/mar/06/sri-lanka-declares-state-of-emergency-after-communal-violence>



the Indian Independence movement tensions got bigger, which brought growing demands for both freedom from British rule and the protection of religious identities.

In 1947 British India was split into two states, India and Pakistan, along religious lines. Pakistan intended to be a Muslim majority state and India remained the same as before. This triggered one of the biggest migrations in human history. Millions of people from religions like Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs were forced to change states, and the process is remembered by mass violence, killings, and the loss of many lives. This event left scars, leaving behind mutual hatred between religious groups in both countries. Pakistan which later in 1971, split into Pakistan and Bangladesh, saw internal conflicts over religious and ethnic identity.

Before India became independent, a secular constitution was established. However communal violence like anti- Sikh riots in 1984 and anti-Muslims riots in 2022, has by time disrupted social harmony. Recently, rising Hindu nationalism has made tensions even worse, specifically for Muslim and Christian communities. In Pakistan religious laws, such as blasphemy laws, have been weaponized against small communities like Ahmadis, Christians, and Hindus, leading to widespread discrimination and violence. Bangladesh, although officially secular, has struggled with violence against Hindus, Buddhists, and Christians, especially during times of political instability.

In Sri Lanka, after the independence British rule in 1948, people have faced their own challenges with religious and ethnic division. Mostly between the Buddhist Sinhalese majority and the Tamil Hindu minority, which caused a civil war that lasted from 1983 to 2009. Recently, tensions have also gone up between Buddhists and Muslim minorities, with nationalist factions fostering hostility and sporadic violence.

The history of religious division and oppression in South Asia has created a complex legacy where religion remains deeply intertwined with identity, politics, and social life. The patterns of discrimination and violence trace back to both pre-colonial conflicts and colonial manipulations, as well as post-independence politics that have often prioritized majority religious communities at the expense of minorities. Understanding the history of religious oppression is important to understanding the magnitude of the topic as well as the challenges that religious communities in South Asia continue to face today.

The Role of International Organizations and Society

International human rights organizations have tried to act on South Asia with religious persecution, by urging governments to uphold the rights of minority communities. Civil Society organizations within these countries also play a key role in advocating for interfaith dialogue and human rights, although they usually face state suppression or societal backlash.

Conclusion

The oppression of Religious Communities in South Asia remains a significant challenge due to political manipulation, legal discrimination, economic marginalization, and societal prejudice.



Addressing this issue needs both societal and governmental levels of understanding, as well as sustained efforts to promote religious tolerance and equal rights for all communities.

Major Parties Involved

India

India's Government has faced a lot of criticism for the way they have handled religious minorities in the past, more specifically under the Influence of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the way it promoted the Hindutva ideology. Policies like the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and inaction when communal riots were being held, concerns were raised about the marginalisation of Muslims, Christians, and Dalits.

Pakistan

Pakistan has been long involved in this topic since its government has been implicated in systemic discrimination against Ahmadiyya Muslims, Hindus, and Christians. Blasphemy laws are very often abused, which causes mod violence and judicial persecution of minorities.

United Nations Human Rights Council

The United Nations Human rights council was established in 2006, with the purpose of promoting human rights all over the world. It helps monitor human rights violations, as well as religious oppression. It has raised its alarms about the persecution of the Rohingya in Myanmar and religious minorities in South Asia. Holding hearings, releasing reports, and pressuring governments to comply with international human rights norms is the council's way of being involved.

Amnesty International

Amnesty International is a Non-governmental Organisation (NGO) which also focuses on human rights advocacy, which can also include the rights of religious minorities. It has released multiple reports, explaining in detail reports on the problem of religious oppression in South Asia, such as, the disenfranchisement of Rohingya Muslims, rules on religious freedom in India, and violent acts against minorities in Pakistan. It campaigns for justice and policy changes to protect marginalised communities.

South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)

SAARC is a regional organization which aims to promote economic and cultural cooperation between South Asia's nations. Although SAARC mostly focuses on economic development, it plays a vital role to this topic due to its lack of action on human rights issues, including persecution. Its potential as a platform for dialogue still stands untouched.

International Crisis Group (ICG)

The ICG, as the name says, is an International Crisis group which focuses on providing detailed analysis of conflicts, such as those involving religious discrimination. The ICG monitors and reports on communal violence religious oppression, offering policy recommendations to mitigate these issues in South Asia.



Myanmar

Myanmar is one of the major countries involved in religious oppression, taking into consideration that it is a military-led government which was responsible for the Rohingya Crisis, which caused mass displacement and genocide against the Muslim Rohingya community.

Timeline of Events

August 15th of 1947	Partition of India: The division of British India into two independent nations; India and Pakistan. One of the largest human migrations in History.
December 16th of 1971	Bangladesh Liberation War Ends: The victory of Bangladesh and Indian forces over Pakistani Military, making Bangladesh independent.
December 6th of 1992	Demolition of Babri Masjid: The destruction of the 16th century mosque in Ayodhya, India. Which Triggered communal riots resulting in significant losses and still affect Indian politics.
August 1st of 2009	Gojra Riots in Pakistan: An extremist mob attack to Christian communities in the town of Gojra following false accusations of Blasphemy.
August 27th of 2013	Muzaffarnagar Riots in India: In Uttar Pradesh, India, there were tensions between Hindu and Muslim communities after a series of violent incidents.
December 12th of 2019	India passes Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), which grants fast-track citizenship to non-Muslim refugees, it sparked protests due to discriminatory behaviour against Muslims.
October 13th of 2021	Anti-Hindu Violence in Bangladesh: During political and social unrest, there were various incidents of mob attacks of temples and Hindu homes across districts.
May 3rd of 2023	Manipur Ethnic Violence: Tensions between the Meitei (Hindus) and Kuki-Zo tribes (Christians), This conflict took a turning point after they started being allowed to access tribal lands in hill areas, which was a threat to their rights.

Previous attempts to solve the issue.

Human Rights council mission to investigate human rights violations against the Rohingya Muslim population.

In 2017 a human rights violation was partaken against the Rohingya Muslim population after Myanmar's military's violent crackdown.¹⁰ After that the Human rights council launched a mission aiming to investigate human rights violations , such as documenting the atrocities like

¹⁰ *Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar* | Ohchr, www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/myanmar-ffm/index Accessed 26 Nov. 2024.



mass killings, sexual violence, and forced displacement which made over 700,000 Rohingya to flee Bangladesh.¹¹ The findings, which labelled the military's actions as "genocide", were intended to hold perpetrators accountable and to push for justice through international courts. This mission also shed light on the root causes of the crisis, which includes systemic discrimination and statelessness, meanwhile it helps to protect Rohingya rights.

Pakistan's Blasphemy Laws such as the 2011 assassination of Salman Taseer.

Salman Taseer was the Governor of Punjab, who was assassinated in January of 2011 by his bodyguard Mumtaz Qadri for opposing Pakistan's strict blasphemy laws and advocating for Asia Bibi who was a Christian woman who was sentenced to death for alleged blasphemy. Taseer's death was a revelation of the risks of speaking against laws and the strong support they have in small conservative communities. His assassination intensified debates about religious extremism and human rights in Pakistan, although the government has avoided remaking the policies in fear of backlash.¹²

Sanctions Against Myanmar Military

Sanctions against Myanmar's military have been implemented by many countries like; the United States of America (USA), the United Kingdom (UK), Canada, and the European Union (EU),¹³ those sanctions were a response to human rights abuses like atrocities against civilians. They aim to limit access to financial resources and equipment used in its campaign of violence following the 2021 coup.¹⁴ Specific measures include policies on transactions with Myanmar's state-run Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise, bans on the sale of aviation fuel and freezes on assets linked to entities supplying materials to the military.¹⁵

¹¹ *UN Expert Calls for Action against Myanmar Military on Anniversary of Atrocities against Rohingya* | Ohchr, www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/08/un-expert-calls-action-against-myanmar-military-anniversary-atrocities Accessed 26 Nov. 2024.

¹² "Explaining the Salman Taseer Murder." *Council on Foreign Relations*, Council on Foreign Relations, www.cfr.org/expert-brief/explaining-salman-taseer-murder Accessed 26 Nov. 2024.

¹³ Lonquest, Jennifer. "US, UK, and Canada Jointly Announce New Myanmar Sanctions." *The Sentry*, 2 Nov. 2023, www.thesentry.org/2023/11/02/80455/us-uk-and-canada-myanmar-sanctions/

¹⁴ Canada, Global Affairs. "Canada Announces Additional Sanctions against Individuals and Entities Supporting Myanmar's Military Regime." *Canada.Ca*, Government of Canada, 28 Mar. 2024, www.canada.ca/en/global-affairs/news/2023/10/canada-announces-additional-sanctions-against-individuals-and-entities-supporting-myanmars-military-regime.html

¹⁵ "Britain, EU, Canada Impose New Sanctions Targeting Myanmar Military." *The Straits Times*, 29 Oct. 2024, www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/uk-eu-and-canada-impose-new-sanctions-targeting-myanmar-military



Possible solutions

The solutions that will be given to you in this study guide, are only ideas for what you can write on your resolution. I would suggest you do research and find as many different solutions as you can! Do not be afraid to get creative with the operative clauses.

Cross- Community Cultural Exchange programs

This solution aims at creating initiatives where numerous different communities can participate in each other's festivals, have art collaborations, and strike up dialogues to help understand and reduce stereotypes and discrimination against each religion. This can specifically be done by the funding of events like joint celebrations of religious festivals (par example: Eid Diwali, Christmas) from Governments and NGOs with an emphasis on inclusivity. As well as making youth-focused programs that can promote cultural immersion in schools which will encourage students of various faiths to experience each other's traditions.

The establishment of a South Asian Minority Protection council (SAMPC)

This Council will be a neutral, multilateral council under SAARC which will be dedicated to protecting minor communities across South Asia, it will be established with the aim of monitoring, reporting and mediating cases of religious violence or persecution. It will also provide incentives like development aid for governments that implement policies promoting religious tolerance. This can be done by having SAARC agree to the council's establishment through a binding framework agreement as well as launching the council with a clear mission to build trust among communities.

Restorative Justice Frameworks

What these frameworks will do is involve victims and perpetrators of communal violence in structured dialogues aimed at reconciliation. With the collaboration of NGOs, countries can facilitate workshops using global best practices adapted for South Asia. As well as creating a community-based reparation program where offenders contribute to rebuilding efforts.

Useful documents

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