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Pakistani social and religious discourse in perspective

Naveen Quayyum

Women's participation in politics, their journalistic and literary endeavours and their role in the struggle for freedom from colonialism, are some of the highlights of Pakistan's recent history. The following article explores gender dimensions of communication and interreligious dialogue, where women's voices can be found in some of its alternative histories.

To put the discourse of communications and interreligious dialogue into perspective, it is significant to observe that Mohammed Ali Jinnah, the founder of the country, took quite a secular approach to such matters. In the past, his views have either been deliberately hidden or propagated as 'misleading' in the media. Yet the following statement from his famous speech to the Pakistan Constituent Assembly on 11 August 1947 reveals his vision:

'You are free, you are free to go to your temples, you are free to go to your mosques or to any other place of worship in the State of Pakistan. You may belong to any religion or caste or creed – that has nothing to do with the business of the State...'

Jinnah's marriage to a non-Muslim woman, Rattanbai, and his sister Fatima, Jinnah's strong companion in all his political struggles, are either ignored or often reduced to mere clichés in the media. Fatima Jinnah is known as the 'mother of the nation', but not many lessons from her support for the freedom struggle as a woman have been promoted by the state controlled communications.

Creation of Pakistan and women's voices

The partition of Pakistan and India was marred by communal riots, mass migration and the massacre of millions in 1947. Women paid an atrocious price. An uncountable number of women were raped, gave birth to 'unwanted-babies' and ended up in refugee camps, while many survivors were disowned by their own families.

In her remarkable research *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the partition of India*, Urvashi Botalia has documented the traumatic experiences of those women and how these narratives remained in the private realm of undocumented history.¹ Botalia says:

'As always, there was widespread sexual savagery: about 75,000 women are thought to have been abducted and raped by men of religions different from their own (and indeed, sometimes by men of their own religion). Thousands of families were divided, homes destroyed, crops left to rot, villages abandoned. Astonishingly, and despite many warnings, the new governments of India and Pakistan were unprepared...'

These painful memories had not healed when another partition followed. The independence of Bangladesh in 1971, known previously as East Pakistan, witnessed one of the worst human right atrocities. And yet again women's bodies served as the battle ground for this conflict as well:

'Numerous women were tortured, raped and killed during the war. The exact numbers are not known and are a subject of debate. Bangladeshi sources cite a figure of 200,000

women raped, giving birth to thousands of “war-babies”. The Pakistan Army abused numerous Bengali women inside the Dhaka Cantonment. Most of the girls were captured from Dhaka University and private homes.²

The mainstream media followed the policies of military governments for many years to come, and managed to hide these unfortunate happenings from the public, until the independent media exposed the stories recently. Yet such histories still found a place in alternative communication expressions. Fiction and literature proved to be one of the spheres, where grief over these unfortunate histories and yearning for a better future by many Pakistani communicators found a space.

Many women writers expressed themselves in this political and historical context, while some were part of the famous Progressive Writers’ Movement. Thinkers mostly with a socialist and leftist political inclination were the ones who initiated and contributed to this movement. They challenged mainstream state-controlled communications by offering an alternative view, including women’s perspectives.

Qurutulain Haider, the subcontinent’s renowned fiction writer, is one among many who took on the ‘unnatural’ (as described by her) partition of India and Pakistan in her work, including her most astounding novel *Mere Bhi Sanam Khane* (My Temples Too, 1949). She later delivered a brilliant commentary in fiction expressing her concerns about the social and political upheavals of the region in *Aag ka Dariya* (The River of Fire, 1953).

Amrita Pritam, Ismat Chughtai, and Dr Nusrat Jehan are three more names among others who contributed women’s perspectives on socio-political issues as mainstream communicators.

The Zia era: Women’s issues and religious minorities

While the long history of military dictatorships in Pakistan left minimal room for democracy to bloom and give birth to stability and development, it is the eleven-year rule of General Zia ul Haq (1977-88) that will always be remembered for its unfortunate consequences for Pakistani women and religious minorities. With his so called process of Islamisation he introduced most discriminatory laws under Haddood Ordinance and Muslim Family Laws. These laws subjected numerous women to accept punishment for adultery despite being raped, or gang raped in several cases. The Haddood Ordinance was revised in 2006 by the Women’s Protection Bill followed by a long struggle by women asking for this law to be repealed.

Similar to women’s situation, Christians along with other religious minorities faced the consequences of General Zia’s hideous policies. They suffered from the blasphemy law (introduced in 1986), under which innocent people were being victimised and were given the death penalty. Most cases have shown that this law is prone to target non-Muslims in situations of internal conflicts and disputes. The blasphemy law is still intact, and after 9/11 with the impact of extremism in Pakistan, it has inflamed the insecurity of religious minorities even more.

A recent statement made by the World Council of Churches (WCC) over the position of Christians was published by *Dawn*, a major Pakistani daily.³ It said:

‘The WCC has claimed that minorities in Pakistan live in fear of persecution and even execution or murder on false charges of blasphemy. The council, a global body linking

Protestant and Orthodox churches in 110 countries, has urged the Pakistan government to change a law that allows for the death penalty for blasphemy.'

Women's movements and gender perspectives in media

Against all the challenges posed by discriminatory laws introduced by past governments and the inability of short-term democracies to deliver, the women's movement has come a long way in Pakistan. Women Action Forum (WAF) was the first organised women's group to raise concerns on these socio-political issues in a loud voice specifically from a gender perspective.⁴ WAF was formed in 1981 in response to the Pakistani government's implementation of the traditional Islamic penal code.

WAF played a central role in the public exposure of controversy regarding various interpretations of Islamic law, its role in the modern state, and ways in which women can play a more active role in political matters. WAF considers all issues as 'women's issues' and has taken positions on national and global developments. It allies itself with democratic and progressive forces in the country as well as linking its struggle with that of minorities and other oppressed peoples.

A gender perspective was incorporated by many women journalists, artists and writers over the years in different ways. Despite media censorship, many women found ways to communicate on these issues to the masses and helped spread awareness. An effort worth mentioning here is *Bari* (Acquittal), a theatre play.⁵ It was written in 1986 and was first performed on International Women's Day in 1987, produced and directed by Madeeha Gauhar, an artist, media person and an enthusiastic member of WAF.

Gauhar's husband, Shahid Nadeem, wrote the play in exile, in London, after having been imprisoned by the military government of General Zia-ul-Haq. The play was based on discriminatory laws against women in Pakistan. *Bari* was later expanded as the TV serial *Neelay Haath* (Blue Hands) directed by Madeeha.

The clash between censorship policies and the struggle of progressive communicators has continued for some time. Efforts by numerous women communicators might have been small in number, but were strong enough to create an impact. 'Who Will Cast the First Stone?' was another ground breaking documentary film by journalist and filmmaker Sabiha Sumar in 1988. In this documentary she narrated the stories of three women in prison in Pakistan under Islamic law and the ordeal they went through. Banned by the government initially, the documentary won the Golden Gate Award at the San Francisco Film Festival in 1998.

Sabhiha continues to present a gender perspective in most of her productions, as shown by her recent feature film *Khamosh Pani* (Silent Waters) in 2003, where she tells the story of a migrant women during the partition times, losing her son once again to religious fundamentalism. The film has become known as a brilliant commentary on the issue of extremism from women's eyes.

Interfaith relations and gender dynamics

General Zia ul Haq's policies of so called Islamisation proved to be a catalyst for religious intolerance, while the recent government's decision to ally with the US after 9/11 added further to a backlash against non-Muslims, who make up 3% of the entire population. However, Christians more so, as they have often wrongly been linked with Western policies. Most of them have remained vulnerable for belonging to the lower economic strata of society.

The roots for this vulnerability go back to the reality of pre-partition conversions of 'lower cast' Hindus by the missionaries, who still constitute the majority of these communities.

Issues from the past such as separate electorates (now repealed), mentioning religion on national identity cards and passports, forced religious conversions and now the growing threat of extremism still remain major concerns for the Christian minorities. Recently the situation worsened with the incident of Gojra (a city in Punjab) where scores of houses were set on fire by a mob on July 30, 2009, when they were told that a few Christians had desecrated the Holy Quran.⁶ Seven people were burnt alive. There were incidents of violence involving Christians in other parts of the country as well.

Ironically, in the specific social and historical context of Pakistan, women and minorities have both faced challenges posed by religious extremism. Therefore while the gender dimensions of interfaith relations might not be sharply defined in Pakistan, many women's groups including civil society organisations still joined hands with churches and communities to protest against violence and discrimination.

Nevertheless, a reality often ignored by the media is the history of people of different faiths living peacefully with their neighbours for years. Often despite the incidence of violence stemming from political issues and flawed laws, the communities at 'people to people' level have cherished a rapport of numerous commonalities. In an incident of church burnings and rioting in the small town of Shantinagar in 1997, many Muslim neighbours of the Christians condemned these acts of violence, and supported the communities and churches. A statement by an *Imam* of a local mosque declared these acts are as un-Islamic and inhuman. Many had a general feeling that the unfortunate incident was a result of an abuse of religious sentiments by only a few, who had their agendas in local politics.

Yet another component of religious intolerance comes from the constitution, where the law has problematic articles pertaining to interfaith marriages in Pakistan. According to interpretations in which a Muslim man can marry a Christian woman as *ahl-e-kitab* (people of the book), a Christian man cannot marry a Muslim woman.⁷ This brings even more complications as Pakistan is still a very conservative society and interfaith marriages are a huge taboo. Therefore, due to an imbalance of power relations in society, often the non-Muslim woman remains vulnerable. Young people who take this step either get ostracised from their communities, or end up with compromising forced conversions.

Communications and interreligious dialogue

Interreligious dialogue is still a unique term for Pakistani society and used more by religious institutions, rather than by the media. In most places, the term 'minority issues' has been preferred. This is due to the reality that it is not the religious communities as such who need to be engaged in dialogue with each other to resolve mutual conflicts, but it is rather initiating dialogue in order to influence the power holders and policymakers together. While religious institutions, including some churches and Christian organisations have been organizing dialogue activities, their outreach to the mainstream media has remained either restricted or exclusive.

The press in Pakistan in comparison to the electronic media has remained more liberal and, therefore, has covered several issues related to minorities and interfaith relations. The *Friday Times* (a quarterly) and *Dawn* (a daily) have been known for covering issues related to minorities as well as women's issues. However the mainstream electronic media still have reservations in addressing interfaith relations openly. Programs produced only with the aim

of interfaith debate have been few, and some of the independent productions talking about these issues were only screened after much controversy as risking offending 'religious sensibilities'.

The religious institutions both Muslim and non-Muslim still need to highlight their positive experiences of engaging in dialogue in the media. There were recently positive efforts by the religious communities, where faith-based perspectives were promoted to condemn intolerance, violence and extremism. However not many received huge space in the media.

At the same time a positive example that can be cited is a programme called *Ghamdi* which has been shown on the popular independent television channel, Geo Network.⁸ In the programme a much acclaimed religious Islamic scholar Dr Javed Ahmed Ghamdi initiated debates on many issues including women and religious minorities from a religious perspective, and promoted a liberal interpretation of the Quran to support his stance for equality and tolerance.

Many of the efforts by the churches, Christian organisations and other religious groups still need to be strengthened in order to highlight their voices in mainstream communications. Interfaith dialogue at the grassroots level also needs more positive involvement by women and young people. Therefore, the gender dynamics of communication and dialogue both need to be supported and promoted by learning the lessons of the past as well as to be able to work for a cohesive and peaceful pluralistic society in Pakistan.

Notes

1. *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the partition of India*, by Urvashi Botalia. Durham Duke University Press, 2000.
2. 'Pakistan: Even the Skies Weep', *Time Magazine*, October 25, 1971.
3. 'Minorities living in fear, says WCC', *Dawn*, 4 September 2009.
4. <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e2511>
5. Interview with Madeeha Gauhar by Rumana Hussain, *Social Pages*, No. 112, Vol. 10, 2004.
6. 'Accused in Gojra incident sent to jail', *Dawn*, 29 October 2009.
7. *Muslim Family Law: A Source Book* by Keith Hodgkinson. Croom Helm London & Canberra, 1984.
8. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Javed_Ahmad_Ghamdi

Naveen Qayyum is a postgraduate in media studies. She produced her first documentary film *Talking Faith* with WCC – World Youth Programme featuring young people exploring interfaith relations in post-9/11 Pakistan – a special mention by jury of the Kara Film Festival in 2009. Her recent documentary film *Hearing the Other Side* focuses on the issues of identity, media and dialogue in the Netherlands. Naveen has been associated with Simorgh, a feminist activist organisation in Pakistan, World Council of Churches – Communications Department in Switzerland, and the Christian Conference of Asia in Thailand. She is a member of WCC – Christian and Muslim Women's Network and WACC – Asia region. Naveen writes on social issues, dialogue and ecumenism as a freelance journalist.