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In defence of minorities

Peter Jacob February 22, 2015 4 Comments

Before quitting the term 'minority', we ought to put alternative safeguards in place for the protection of rights of minorities



Victims of identity crisis.

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Among scores of lines immortalised by William Shakespeare is, “What’s in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.” The lines gained proverbial importance attributable to an appeal to realism and simple symbolism used by the author. Many of us agree with his logic and do not give two hoots to change of names or identities.



Conversely, Faiz Ahmad Faiz used satire in one of his most popular Urdu poems to capture the politics of names and changes thereof. He says “*Hum se kehtey hain chaman waley ghareeban-e-chaman, tum koe achcha sa rakh lo apney veeraney ka naam.*”

During the Independence movement, Gandhiji named the marginalised sections of India, the Harijan (children of God) replacing the historical characterisation of Shudra, whom the British rulers classified as Scheduled Castes. The experience over a century showed that social discrimination was hard to eliminate merely by changing the identity until pervasive social and economic injustice and political inequality was addressed.

Ultimately the concerned communities in independent India chose to name themselves Dalits (the suppressed). Today the term Dalit is commonly used, though the constitution of India (Article 341) and other laws use the terms Scheduled caste and Scheduled tribes to introduce affirmative action.

While Gandhiji tried to elevate the status of these people by using a term which had a religious connotation, Shudra or the Untouchables was a social construction to maintain class based marginalisation. The term Scheduled Caste was a technical categorisation basically for official records such as the population census. Finally, Dalit is more of a realist choice to fight discrimination in the political arena. Each characterisation after the term Shudra helped create social space and alleviating the suffering of these people incrementally.

Similarly, the African-Americans were called by other names,

The emphasis on minorities in today's political

considered derogatory, before the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Hence growing social sensitivity in North America made it possible in the past few decades that those terms were replaced. Nevertheless, this was milestone of the continuing struggle against racial discrimination rather than a victory.

discourse in the country is due to an exaggerated emphasis on majority religion in the constitution, polity and public policies.

The educated Muslims in British ruled India, preferred to be called Mohammdans or Musalmans before they settled and are widely known as Muslims. In the official records of Pakistan, Muslim-Sheikh remains the caste identity of the Muslims who converted from a socially marginalised class.

The scholars, politicians and social activists in Pakistan are in search of a suitable term for the communities who do not subscribe to the majority religion. Ironically though, because these faith communities have been living here for generations and centuries, some of them also formed a majority religion at some point in history.

Whilst the constitution of Pakistan makes distinctions and preferences on the basis of religion and the term minority is a legal term, some despise the use of the term minority, thinking that it reinforces religious divide and inequality among the citizens. The objectors are concerned about religious extremism and intolerance that prevails and thus they would like to use inclusive and non-discriminatory terminology.

Keeping in view that a choice of an identity has been part of the movements for civil rights against discrimination in many societies. The objection therefore is a blessing, showing signs of life among us. However, the critical question is, which choice of terminology will serve the purpose of inculcating equality and acknowledging diversity among citizens better.

The term “non-Muslim citizens” has gained currency in this wake and the term “minorities” is under a criticism. An opposition leader announced a few weeks back that his party will do away with the word minority when it comes to power. The statement completely ignored the fact that the use of term non-Muslims has serious repercussions in concept as well as in practice.

The term non-Muslims tells what a host of religious identities (Hindus, Christians, Bahai’s, Sikhs, Ahamdis, Buddhists, Parsis, Jews) living in Pakistan are not, rather than explaining what they are. Thus the term falls short of a positive portrayal of one or more faith communities. Secondly the term itself divides and defines people using the majority religion as a standard therefore it cannot serve the purpose of respecting religious diversity or strengthening the pluralistic democracy.

On the other hand the term minority is universal, religiously and neutral. Moreover, it is widely used in the protective legislation throughout the world. The international treaty laws including the International Convention for Civil and Political Rights (1966), Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities (1992) add important protections for minorities’ rights.

United Nations had a sub-commission on protection of minorities for about 60 years which played a pivotal role in framing and developing human rights norms. The UN has also appointed an independent expert on minorities’ issues since 2005. Therefore, before we resign the term minority, we ought to put alternative safeguards in place that have been devised over the decades for protection of rights of minorities.

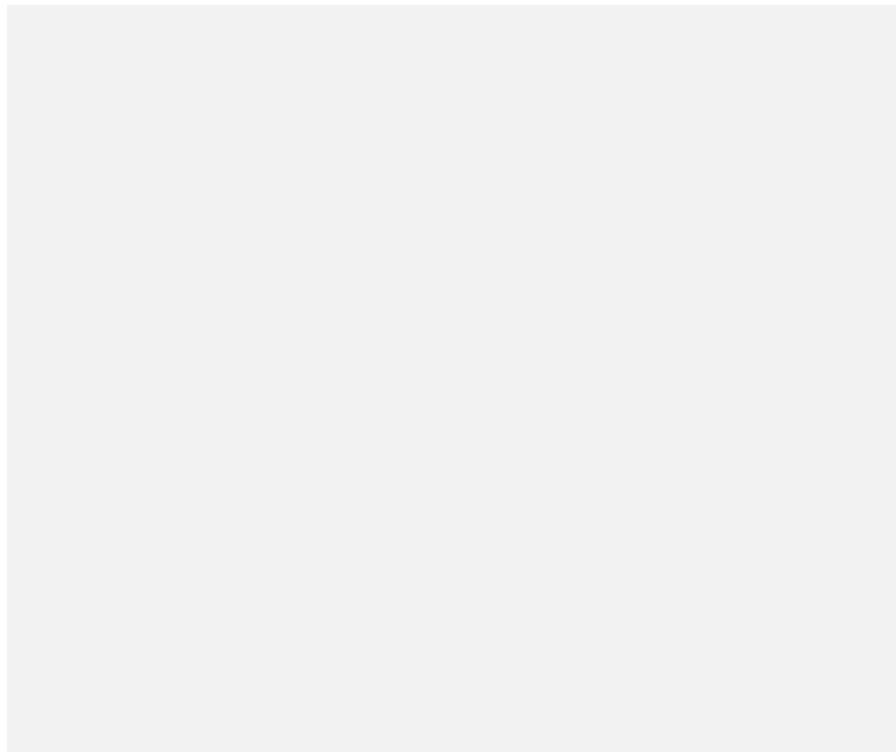
The protection of rights of minorities being the *raison d’être* for creation of our country, we in Pakistan cannot undervalue the need for special protection and legal guarantees for religious minorities. It is another matter that besides religious minorities we need to expand this recognition to ethnic, linguistics,

national and perhaps sectarian minorities in order to protect the entire spectrum of minorities or communities vulnerable to abuse of their human rights.

As far as religious minorities, we should not ignore that the emphasis on the minorities in today's political discourse in the country, by default and design, is due to an exaggerated emphasis on majority religion in the constitution, polity and public policies. Therefore, we might have to address the cause first in order to treat the religious discrimination and social inequality.

The religious communities of smaller demographic representation have not reacted negatively to assimilative trends though that implied losing some of their cultural strengths. They are victims of identity crisis. The purpose of preserving religious diversity will necessitate recognising their individuality rather than bracketing them in a generic category with reference to the majority religion.

Till the time we march towards integration of all sections of society, "religious minorities" is not a bad term to use.



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February 22, 2015 at 6:09 pm

The use of term minority is quite confusing in our country. This article is defining the word “minority” very well.

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nadeem fazil

February 23, 2015 at 12:55 am

Excellent read.

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Naumana Suleman



February 23, 2015 at 2:59 am

The article has placed a sound, well reasoned, compelling and persuasive argument.

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iqbal A. Alavi

February 23, 2015 at 6:17 am

Agree. The word “religious minority” appears suitable.

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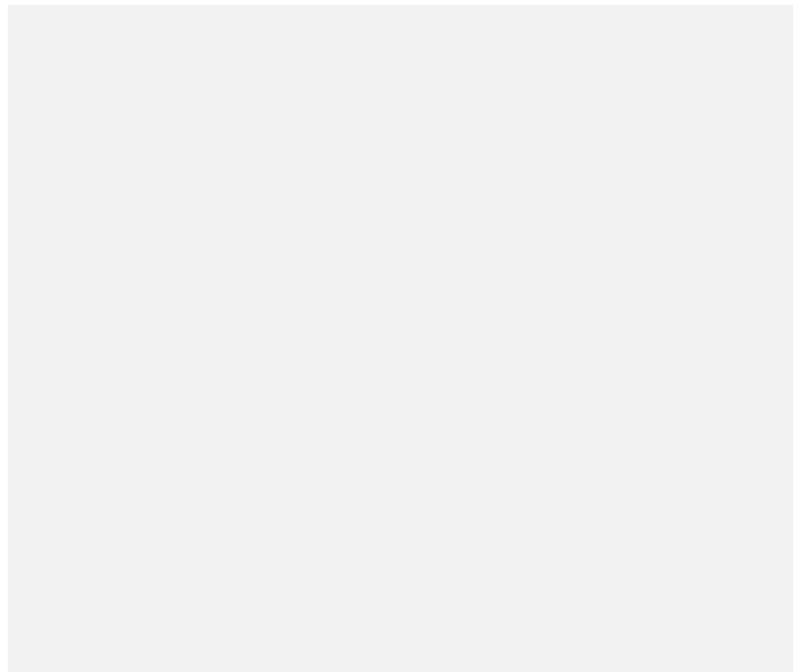
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