

PAKISTANI AUTHORS

Writer's Interview : How minorities became invisible in Pakistan

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Farahnaz Ispahani, the Pakistani politician and author blames, the military-mullah nexus for the terrible discrimination against minorities. But she believes that there is hope for a turnaround.

Farhanaz Ispahani was a Member of the Pakistani Parliament and the Media Adviser to the President of Pakistan from 2008-2012. Her latest book, *Purifying the Land of the Pure : Pakistan's Religious Minorities*, charts what she calls the "slow genocide" of minorities in the country from Independence in 1947 to the present day.

She speaks to Scroll about her book, the genesis of Pakistan's anti-minority discrimination and how the country is coping with it today.

Shoaib Daniyal - You've charted the worsening of the situation for minorities in Pakistan in your book. Can you explain what's happened ? How has the life of a Hindu, Christian or even a Shia Muslim got worse since 1947 ?

Farahnaz Ispahani - Firstly the numbers of Hindus and Sikhs have dwindled massively, first at the time of Partition and then at the time of the severance of East Pakistan, which had a vibrant and politically powerful Hindu community. With the Christian community, some left at Partition. But a lot of the brain drain in the Christian community came later, because different governments viewed them as they did the Hindus - with suspicion and as disloyal to the state. And then the nationalisation of the schools in the 1970s was a big blow to the Christians because a lot of the Christian middle-class or upper middle-class ran the the very finest educational institutions. When these schools and colleges were nationalised, it took away those people who had voices in society and who could speak for the less well-off members of the Christian community.

At that time, we saw a lot of Christians, whether they were Goan Christians or Anglo-Indians or the Punjabi Christians who were able to, leave for Canada or Australia, or for that matter anywhere else. Shias are a bit different and they have not been declared non-Muslim yet, unlike the Ahmadis. But from the time of Zia we see a push to declare them as *kafir* or *wajib-ul-qatl* (fit to kill).

In my book, I divide this process into four distinct stages :

#1 Muslimisation, 1947-1951 : Massive decline in Hindu and Sikh populations. So Pakistan becomes more Muslim demographically.

#2 Islamic identity, 1958-1971 : State-sponsored textbooks rejecting pluralism are published. This was an attempt to forge a Pakistani identity purely on the basis of Islam. So this is where you see Mohenjodaro and the Indus Valley Civilisation or the great Buddhist civilisation, and what made

the land mass and its people who we are, being eradicated from the state's version of history. All you have is the completely ludicrous narrative of Mohammad Bin Qasim coming to India. Little children grow up not even knowing who they are and therefore you now have a wannabe Arabistan.

#3 Anti-minority laws, 1974-1988 : Making the laws more Islamic resulted in creating a legal framework against the minorities, starting with the 1974 anti-Ahmadi legislation to 1988, the death of the dictator Zia-ul-Haq.

#4 Militant hostility, 1990-present : this includes terrorism and organised violence against the minorities, which continues till today.

In your book you've used Jinnah as a bulwark for a liberal Pakistan. But there would be many in India who would trace Pakistan's current problems right back to the Two Nation Theory that he propounded. How would you respond to that ?

See, this is something I understand and I knew this is something people would ask me about here. But from what I've read and from what I've documented – you see the suppression of Mr Jinnah's speech delivered on August 11 while he's still alive – you realise that something is already very wrong. There is a part of the country that's already being hijacked even while he's alive.

In politics, people do do despicable things. There are certain things that you might not agree with. Politics, and especially the creation of a country, is an emotive issue. So the call of "Islam is in danger" that the Muslim League used pre-Partition was because Mr Jinnah wanted to rally everyone to achieve Pakistan – and now every citizen would be equal. So for me, he's the founder of my nation. I'm a first generation Pakistani and he is what I have to look up to.

In your book you've spoken of the military-mullah nexus. But what has also happened is that a lot of the democratic, even the leftist politicians have used Islamism. For example Bhutto declaring the Ahmadis to be non-Muslim in 1974. So does this democratic-dictator binary have any meaning ? For example, had Benazir Bhutto lived, would it have made a substantial difference to minorities in Pakistan ?

If you read Benazir Bhutto's last book or her last speech delivered on the day she was assassinated, she had become very aware. She spoke to the press and told them that if things continued this way, we'll see the Taliban flag hanging in Swat and that's what happened post her death. She noticed it in her crowds – there were fewer women, the people were less varied.

She realised that if we don't take this back – the soft, Sunni true Islam – and make a country for everybody, we'll be in a very hard place.

Do you think Pakistanis has been shocked into realising the effects of fundamentalism after events like the assassination of Benazir Bhutto and the 2014 Peshawar School massacre ?

Everyone mourned the loss of Benazir – from school children to women in villages ; even her harshest political opponents. And we need that leadership. What I'm trying to do is trying to keep the movement alive.

Pakistan has incredible music, drama, lawyers, writers, academic and journalists. So we have hope. The question now is that how many people will stand with us. Mr Nawaz Sharif made a very strong point recently by celebrating both Diwali and Christmas. So did Mr Zardari [of the Pakistan People's Party] and so did the MQM in Karachi. This sort of public celebration of minority festivals is new in Pakistan. Minorities are invisible in Pakistan ; they have no presence.

And then one of the most famous ancient temple complexes in the subcontinent, the Katas Raj Temple [situated in Pakistani Punjab] is being rebuilt. Churches destroyed by suicide bombers are also being rebuilt. So there are signs of a turnaround. All parties seem to have understood that this is something we all need to work on. Remember, this is being led by Nawaz Sharif, who tried to bring in Sharia law when he first came to power [in 1990]. So that's how significant this turnaround might be. After the 2014 Peshawar school massacre there were also a couple of Shia Imambaras that were attacked and also Data Darbar, Lahore's largest sufi shrine that was bombed. So much has happened in Pakistan now that every human being realises that these jihadi groups need to be stopped.

For the past year, India has been having a huge debate about intolerance. Do you see any parallels with Pakistan on this ?

Well, South Asia as a whole is very problematic. You look at Bangladesh which has gone from being very secular to the murders of secular bloggers today and more and more Wahabbi Islam popping up everywhere. In India, the Muslim and Christian communities have all come under a great deal of pressure. And then you can look at Nepal and look at Sri Lanka, also.

In fact, not only this region, look at Donald Trump in the United States. He is the lead presidential candidate at this point and he's someone who says that Muslims should be put into camps and then you have the mounting Islamophobia in Europe. You also see severe anti-Semitism in France as well. Synagogues and Jews wearing yalmukes are being attacked there. So it's sort of a disease all over the world and this really scares me. So my message to everyone else is don't wait : by the time something has changed in your constitution, it's already too late. Every government which is not being proactive in snuffing out this sort of communal or sectarian hate speech or physical violence has put its country on a terribly slippery slope. The mixture of politics and religion is incendiary. I have seen too many dead bodies to not have learnt that.

P.-S.

* « Minorities are invisible in Pakistan : writer Farahnaz Ispahani ». Scroll.in· Jan 25, 2016 · 08:30 am :

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