

DALITS IN PAKISTAN

BOOK REVIEW

Name of the Book: **Hamey Bhi Jeeney Do: Pakistan Mai Acchoot Logon ki Suratehal (Urdu)** [‘Let us Also Live: The Situation of the Untouchables in Pakistan’]

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Caste, the scourge of Hinduism, is so deeply entrenched in Indian society that it has not left the adherents of Islam, Sikhism, Christianity and Buddhism—theoretically egalitarian religions—unaffected. So firmly rooted is the cancer of caste in the region that it survives and thrives in neighbouring Pakistan, where over 95% of the population are Muslims, as this slim book tells us.

Pirbhu Lal Satyani, the author of the book, is a Pakistani Hindu social activist based in Lahore, working among the Dalits in his country. Of Pakistan’s roughly 3 million Hindu population, he says, over 75% are Dalits, belonging to various castes, the most prominent being Meghwals, Odhs, Valmikis, Kohlis and Bhils. They reside mainly in southern Punjab and Sindh. Satyani provides startling details about the plight of the Dalits of Pakistan, which appears to be no different from that of the Dalits of India.

In a speech in 1944, Satyani writes, Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan, declared that the Muslim League would protect the rights of the Dalits, and he assured them of full security. Accordingly, Jogendra Nath Mondal, a Dalit from East Bengal, was appointed as the leader of the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan and the first Law Minister of the country. This suggests, Satyani says, that Jinnah was genuine in his concern for the Dalits of Pakistan. However, things began to change after Jinnah’s death, and in 1953 Mondal resigned from the Cabinet and migrated to India. This was an indication of the growing intolerance towards minorities in post-Jinnah Pakistan. Today, as Satyani shows, minorities lead a bleak existence in Pakistan, the worst sufferers among them being the country’s Dalits.

Following the Partition of India, Satyani says, most Hindus living in what is now Pakistan migrated to India. The vast majority of those who stayed back in Pakistan were Dalits. In the years after the Partition, he writes, there has been a steady migration of Hindus to India, especially in the immediate aftermath of the 1965 and 1971 wars between India and Pakistan. The destruction of the Babri Masjid in India in 1992 and the ensuing massacre of Muslims in different parts of India by Hindutva extremists, led to a heightening of insecurity among the Pakistani Hindus, causing a sizeable number of them to migrate to India. Most of these migrants were ‘upper’ caste Hindus. Lacking money and resources, Dalits in Pakistan were unable to make the same choice. In addition, Satyani writes, ‘The Dalits are so caught up with mere day-to-day survival issues that Hindu-Muslim conflicts or Pakistan-India disputes are not as important for them as they are for rich ‘upper’ caste Hindus’. To add to this probably is the fact that life for Dalits in India is hardly better than in Pakistan.

Most Pakistani Dalits work as landless agricultural labourers and sweepers, Satyani writes. In rural areas their huts are located in separate settlements outside the main village and they generally lack even basic amenities.

Large numbers of Dalits also lead a nomadic existence, traveling from village to village in search of manual work. Many Dalits live in temporary structures in the land of landlords for whom they work and they can be expelled from their whenever the landlords wish, having no title to the land. They generally earn a pittance and are often forced into free labour by powerful 'upper' caste Hindu and Muslim feudal lords. Many Dalits eke out a miserable existence as bonded labourers, being heavily indebted to landlords and moneylenders. If they protest false cases are lodged against them and the police does little or nothing to protect them. Local administrative officers routinely harass them and even forcibly take away their cattle and other such belongings. Land mafias in rural Sindh often forcibly grab the land on which Dalits set up their huts. In most places Dalits have no temples of their own. They have few places where they can burn their dead, and many of these are illegally occupied by local Muslims.

In schools in the villages, Satyani tells us, Dalit students routinely face discrimination and are not allowed to use utensils that are used by other students. In schools Dalit students are often badly treated by Muslim teachers and students. Despite being the poorest of the poor, they do not receive any scholarships on the grounds that money for scholarships comes from zakat funds and hence it is not permissible for non-Muslims to avail of them. Further, owing to desperate poverty few Dalits can afford to send their children for higher education, and, generally, children are withdrawn from school at an early age to engage in manual work to help supplement the family's meagre income. In many cases, Dalits do not send their girls to school fearing that they might be kidnapped, raped or forced to convert to Islam.

In towns and cities Dalits generally live in the poorest parts, in squalid slums. There are no organizations working among them for their welfare, and, lacking a strong political leadership of their own, they are not able to effectively assert their voice in demanding their rights from the state or from the larger society, not even to protest in cases of human rights violations. Many of them do not possess national identity cards, and so cannot access various government developmental schemes. Government facilities for religious minorities are almost monopolized by the country's more powerful and organized Christian and 'upper' caste Hindu communities, leaving the Dalits untouched.

Because of acute poverty, rampant illiteracy and discrimination and the absence of a Dalit movement as in India, Dalits in Pakistan have no political influence at all, Satyani says. In many places, Dalits are not allowed to freely vote for candidates of their own choice. They are often forced by powerful 'upper' caste Hindu and Muslim landlords to vote for particular candidates, and if they are refused they are pressurized into leaving their homes or are beaten up. The problem of Dalit political marginalisation is complicated by the acute divisions among the Dalits, with various Dalit castes practicing untouchability among themselves. For its part, the Pakistani state, Satyani says, prefers to promote the economically and socially more influential 'upper' caste Hindus as 'leaders' of the Hindus, instead of trying to promote an alternate Dalit leadership. Thus, for instance, in 2002, of the nine seats reserved for the Sindh provincial assembly for religious minorities, seven were for Hindus and only one for Dalits, while Dalits account for more than 70% of the Hindu population of the province. The state's lack of commitment to helping the Dalits is also evident from the fact that despite there being some 3,50,000 Dalits in southern Punjab (mainly in the Rahim Yar Khan and Bahawalpur districts) there are no reserved seats for Dalits or Hindus in the provincial assembly. All the seats reserved for minorities in the assembly for minorities are occupied by Christians. Further, government affirmative policies meant especially for Dalits have been done away with, Satyani writes. While Jinnah had provided a 6% job quota for Dalits in some government services, in 1998 the government of

Nawaz Sharif, assisted by some 'upper' caste Hindu and Christian leaders, changed the Dalit quota to a general minorities' quota, thus effectively denying Dalits assured access to government jobs.

Dalits, like other minorities in Pakistan, Satyani tells us, are also victims of religious discrimination, by both Muslims as well as 'upper' caste Hindus. Despite the Hindus being a minority in Pakistan, 'upper' caste Hindus continue to discriminate against the Dalits. Generally, Dalits are refused entry into Hindu temples belonging to the 'upper'

castes. 'Upper' caste Hindu landlords and businessmen in Sindh, Satyani writes, show little concern for the plight of the Dalits, and, instead, are often complicit, along with Muslim feudal lords, in oppressing them.

As in large parts of India, in eateries in the rural areas of Sindh, owned both by 'upper' caste Hindus as well as Muslims, Dalits are forced to use separate utensils and are expected to wash them themselves after use. When they visit hospitals for treatment they are generally left unattended and, being considered as untouchables, are not allowed to touch

utensils meant for public use there. Often, Dalit women are gang-raped, murdered or are forced to convert to Islam, but no action is taken against the perpetrators of these crimes. Besides this, due to discrimination by 'upper' caste Hindus, many Dalits have converted to Islam and Christianity on their own.

Satyani ends his book with a list of recommendations for addressing the plight of Dalits in his country. He suggests that the government of Pakistan should insist that the question of Dalit human rights and amelioration of their pathetic conditions be placed as part of the SAARC agenda. This, presumably, would force all the SAARC member states, including India, to take the issue of caste oppression seriously. He calls for the setting up of a national commission in Pakistan to monitor the conditions of the country's Dalits and to work for their welfare. Dalits, he says, should be given reserved seats in the National and Provincial Assemblies in accordance with their population as well as adequate representation in all government services. In areas with a high Dalit population, councils should be created by the state for development of the Dalits. All 'black laws' against religious minorities should be repealed, Satyani advises, and to improve relations between different religious communities the educational curriculum should be revised and negative portrayals of non-Muslim communities and their religions should be deleted. Landless labourers should be granted titles to land; Hindu, including Dalit, employees should be given holidays on the occasion of their festivals; Dalit communities that do not have any cremation grounds of their own should be provided with such facilities; Dalits should be given the right to use public wells and taps and to live within the villages, instead, as of now, outside them; and Hindu temples presently under the control of the Waqf Department should be given back to the community. In schools with a sizeable Hindu population, Hindu children should be provided facilities to study their own religion instead of Islam.

Whether the state authorities willing to accede to these demands, however, is another question.

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Indian Dalit readers could help Pirbhu Lal by sending him Dalit literature in English or Urdu.

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