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Interfaith Dialogue Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow: The Case of Lahore District

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Introduction

Lahore, the capital city of Punjab province has remained a multi-religious and multicultural space for centuries. People from various beliefs, ethnic and cultural backgrounds used to live here and took part in the joys, sorrows, famines, and festivals of each other.¹⁷ Lahore has been home to eight major religions of the world i.e. Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Zoroastrianism, Christianity, Islam, Judaism and Sikhism¹⁸ and people from diverse religious arrays enjoyed interreligious dialogue, where they shared their world-views and perspectives freely.¹⁹ This religious diversity can be seen through the various mosques, shrines, churches, temples, and gurdwaras that spot the city.²⁰

But at present, Lahore has lost most of its religious and cultural diversity, and interreligious harmony due to the cataclysmic violence of Partition in which 11.2 million people crossed the newly drawn border²¹ with Hindus and Sikhs migrating to India. The Hindu, Sikh and Muslim communities which had coexisted for approximately a millennium violently attacked each other and as a result, thousands lost their lives in the carnage.²²

After independence, religious violence erupted in the early 1950's in Lahore, against the Ahmadiyya community. After that, Lahore generally maintained its tradition of interfaith harmony but the conflict returned in the 1970s and heightened in the 1980s, initially against the Ahmadiyya community and later also against the Christians. Structural discrimination based on laws and recurring violent incidences has tested the pluralistic, multi-cultural, and harmonious

¹⁷ Majid Sheikh, *Lahore the tales without End* (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 2015).

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Shahid Mukhtar, *Din-e-Ila'hi Aghaz Say Anjam Tak* (Lahore: Shahid Publishers and Book Sales) 100-131.

²⁰ F.S. Aijazuddin, *Lahore Recollected an Almumb* (Lahore: Sange-e-Meel Publications, 2004).

²¹ K. Hill, W. Selzer, J. Leaning, S. J. Malik et al., "The Demographic Impact of Partition in Punjab in 1947", *Population Studies*, Vol. 62, No. 2, (2008): 155-170.

²² William Dalrymple, "The Great Divide", *The New Yorker*, June, 22, 2015. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/06/29/the-great-divide-books-dalrymple>

inter-faith character of Lahore, enhancing the feelings of insecurity and vulnerability among religious minorities.

Research Objective and Methodology

To counter such feelings and develop the inter-faith harmony of yesteryears, multiple inter-faith dialogue initiatives have been taking place in the city. However, little academic work has been done to put these dialogues in the context of the historical tradition of interaction among various faith-based communities, as well as within the contemporary context of inter-faith dialogue being practiced around the world. As interfaith dialogue can promote pluralism, inclusivity, and social harmony for peaceful coexistence, it can lead to the dismantling of societal and institutionalized discrimination against religious minorities.²³ This study is an attempt to understand the historical evolution and nature of interfaith dialogue in Lahore, while critically assessing the current practice of interfaith dialogue in the city.

For a deeper understanding of current dialogue practices in Lahore, it uses the triangulation method inclusive of interviews, focused group discussions, and participant observations of inter-faith dialogue activities. A total of twenty-one interviews, two focused group discussions, and six participant observations were conducted consisting of interfaith practitioners, academics, religious leaders, public policy experts, government officials, women's rights activists, civil society activists, social and political workers, inter-faith scholars, Christian religious leaders, and common people mainly in an urban setting.

Theoretical Framework

The root of the word "dialogue" comes from the Greek word *dia-logos* which means 'to talk something through'. It refers to a reciprocal movement in which engaged partners are open to differences and otherness. Leonard Swidler stresses five elements of a dialogue including listening, learning, respecting the

other, comparing apples with apples rather than with oranges, and not denigrating the other in case of a disagreement. Stressing the importance of listening, he states that "overall, respect for listening serves as the ground rule for dialogue and further keeping in view that not any single group holds the absolute knowledge about nature and the deeds of the Almighty."²⁴

Kenneth Cracknell provides further guidelines for interfaith dialogue suggesting that "dialogue acknowledges various religious, political, economic and cultural orientations and loyalties of the dialogue partners. A careful consideration of specific dictions with regards to culture and context is vital among dialogue partners while the effort to proselytize or to prove religious superiority by any adherent can hinder the productivity and integrity of the dialogue. Mainly, 'dialogue of life' is a transformative form of inter-faith dialogue when people share their lives with each other by opening their homes and praying together. This means opening your mind and spirit through a broader vision in the presence of Almighty."²⁵ Though this suggests that interfaith dialogue involves the complete socio-political and economic context of dialogue partners, Imam Abdul Malik Mujahid, former chairman of the Parliament of the World's Religions goes a step further by stating that even talking to neighbors of a different faith on mutual human issues is also dialogue, and a constructive dialogue would move from conversation to action on common ground. He further adds that for the common human good, interfaith dialogue should deal with all necessary issues in a comprehensive way but should avoid issues that can lead to conflict.²⁶

Supporting Mujahid's position on interfaith dialogue among common folks during their daily interactions, Michael Nazir-Ali, president of the Oxford Centre for Training, Research, Advocacy and Dialogue (OXTRAD) further differentiates between "discursive dialogue", which is about the exchange of information; "spiritual dialogue", which shares the riches of spiritual experi-

²³ Parliament of the World's Religions, "Publications and Reports", <https://parliamentofreligions.org/publication> (Accessed 5 January, 2017).

²⁴ Yvonne Aburrow, "How to do Interfaith dialogue", Patheos, July 15, 2014. <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/sermonsfromthemound/2014/07/how-to-do-interfaith-dialogue/> (13 November, 2015).

²⁵ Gerard Forde, "A Journey Together: A resource for Christian Muslim Dialogue", Cois Time, 2013. <https://www.pobal.ie/Publications/Documents/A%20Journey%20Together%20-%20Cois%20Tine%20-%20202013.pdf> (Accessed 17 May 2015).

²⁶ US-Pakistan Interreligious Consortium organized by UMT in Lahore Pearl continental hotel at March 27-29, 2017.

ences; from a third type of dialogue about fundamental freedoms and of building a common home. This dialogue should also take place between neighbors and colleagues at work, beyond the level of religious leaders or scholars.²⁷ Thus, effective interfaith dialogue requires that it is inclusive of women, youth, and ordinary citizens, and adopts a holistic approach to discussing building a common home together in the spirit of peace, social justice, and community service.

History of Interfaith Dialogue in Lahore

The history of interfaith harmony and dialogue in Lahore and Punjab owes a great deal to the Sufi and Bhagti movements. Their lives and teachings served as a symbol of social harmony and created a spirit of togetherness which led to a culture of religious fusion while also influencing the rulers. Though this tradition of religious interaction, inclusivity, and communal meals as practiced by Baba Farid (1179-1266), Guru Nanak (1469-1539), Shah Hussain (1538-1599), Mian Mir (1550-1635), Bulleh Shah (1680-1757), Waris Shah (1710-1738) and others still continues, it has drastically weakened owing to various factors.

Mughal & Sikh Period:

The era of Mughal Emperor Akbar (1556-1605) is considered exemplary for interfaith harmony in India. He promoted religious cohesion between Hindus and Muslims.²⁸ To institutionalize the idea of interreligious discourse, he built two buildings in Lahore: at Khair Pura for Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians and Muslims and at Dharam Pura for Hindus, Jains, Buddhists, and Valmiki.²⁹ He frequently took part in those meetings to improve his understanding of these religions.³⁰ Akbar also facilitated translation of various Hindu books³¹, and expedited the translation of the four Gospels of the New Testament into Persian by the

engagement of Jerome Xavier, a Jesuit priest. These translations opened the door for theological dialogue among various religious experts. It is further claimed by Falix Vayle that after the year 1576 when Ibadat Khana (house of worship) hosted cosmopolitan communities for scholarly exchanges, Akbar constituted the 'First Parliament of Religions'.³² Though interreligious discourse seemed to continue in later Mughal period with the notable example of Prince Dara Shikoh (1615-1659), the tradition of tolerance and interfaith harmony was systematically reversed during Aurangzeb's (1618-1707) period.

The early 19th century reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh³³ was again a throwback to Akbar's time, as he advocated diversity and religious plurality³⁴ and his administration and army constituted peoples of all religions. The Maharaja facilitated the translation of Hindu and Muslim holy literature into various languages, and the Holy Quran was translated into *Gurumukhi and Shahmukhi* for the first time.³⁵ He equally acknowledged celebrations of religious festivals with great festivity as a dialogue of life and deed. He observed the fast with Muslims in Ramazan, celebrated Holi with Hindus and traveled to Amritsar every month to perform Sikh rituals,³⁶ while asking people of various religions to pray for him.³⁷

The British Period:

The British period was a mixture of interfaith dialogue, polemics, and apologetics towards the 'religious other'. After the 1857 rebellion, religious debate, proselytization, missionary activity, and religious revivalist movements emerged as the new norm in India, and Lahore retained its tradition of religious dialogue and interfaith harmony.³⁸ The policy of religious freedom and tolerance was adopted by the British in India post

²⁷ Lecturer on 17th November, 2016 Center for Public Policy and Governance Forman Christian College Lahore.

²⁸ Shankar Nair, *Translating Wisdom: Hindu-Muslim Intellectual Interactions in Early Modern South Asia*, (California: University of California Press, 2020).

²⁹ G. C. Walker, Esquire, *Gazetteer of the Lahore District 1893-94*, (Lahore: Sang-e-meel Publications, 2006).

³⁰ Awami Jhamoori Forum, "Akbar aur Punjab 1556- 1605", *Apna Org*. <http://apnaorg.com/books/magazines/ajf-50/book/page0013.jpg>

³¹ Shahid Mukhtar, *Din-i-Ilahi Aghaz say Anjam Tak*, (Lahore: Shahid Publishers and Book Sellers, 138).

³² Shahid Mukhtar, *Din-i-Ilahi Aghaz say Anjam Tak*, (Lahore: Shahid Publishers and Book Sellers, 148).

³³ Mushtaq Soofi, "Punjab Notes: Space for Religious Diversity", *DAWN*, November, 14, 2014. <http://www.dawn.com/news/1144364> (Accessed 12 April 2016).

³⁴ Mushtaq Soofi, "Gora Raj: our elders and national narrative", *DAWN*, April, 11, 2014.

³⁵ TEDx. "The untold history of Sikh rule under Ranjit Singh in Lahore, Fakir Syed, TEDxULahore" Filmed [May 2014]. You Tube video, 1951. Posted [May 2014].

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yWxDhT3ybUs>

³⁶ The Sikh Court, "The Legacy of Maha Raja Ranjit Singh", Gateway to Sikhism, <http://www.sikh-history.com/sikhhist/warriors/ranjit10.html> (Accessed 17 December, 2016).

³⁷ Gurdashan Singh Dhillon, "The Sikh Rule and Ranjit Singh", Gateway to Sikhism, <https://www.allaboutsikhs.com/sikhism-articles/the-sikh-rule-and-ranjit-singh> (Accessed 21 December, 2016).

³⁸ Maqsood Kamil, "Religious Extremism and Christian Response in the context of Pakistan" (Paper presented at Stott-Bediako Amman, Jordan, 2015), 20.

Queen Victoria's proclamation of 1858,³⁹ which allowed people of all religions to freely preach, practice, print literature, and engage in dialogue and debate, and there were instances when the government-supervised interreligious dialogues and debates through its magisterial bodies.

Dr. Charles Forman (1821-1894), the founder of Forman Christian College, encouraged interreligious discussions on a daily basis in different parts of the Walled City of Lahore during his forty-year educational career.⁴⁰ In 1872, the Brahmo Samaj built a *mandir* in Anarakali for their prayers on Sunday, while facilitating interreligious dialogue sessions every Friday where people from all faith were welcome.⁴¹ Similarly, the Sanatan Dharm Sabha established in 1889 organized lectures and seminars every Sunday evening to encourage all faith groups to participate in interreligious dialogical exchanges. The society was so deeply interwoven that someone from outside could not make a clear distinction between various religious groups.⁴² This religiously diverse and plural Lahore had far-reaching influence on Western theologians, academics, and workers who lived and served in Lahore. For instance, Gottlieb Wilhelm Leitner, the principal of Government College Lahore, set up the Oriental Institute to teach oriental languages, cultures, philosophies, and religions in Britain.⁴³ Similarly, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, a Presbyterian minister and scholar of Islam established the Institute of Islamic Studies at McGill Canada and was one of the founders of the Center for the Study of World Religions at Harvard University.⁴⁴

Restoration of Dialogue after Partition

The Partition of Punjab disrupted interfaith harmony, mixed neighborhoods, and an evolving syncretic

culture by polarizing the population along religious lines while leaving bitter memories of sectarian warfare.⁴⁵ As Sikhs and Hindus left Lahore, Muslims and non-Muslims stopped being equal parties in dialogue, while any interfaith dialogue that did take place, moved into private spaces. Further, the state after independence made limited attempts to build intellectual, historical, and multi-cultural linkages among different regions of the country and instead, the monist Islamic State identity glossed over the respect for religious and cultural diversity.⁴⁶ For example, festivals of religions other than Islam have been removed from the national calendar since 1953, which has led to pluralism coming under stress.⁴⁷

The impact has been tremendous. While the Sikh, Hindu, Ahmadi, and Shia communities have been a target of various religious groups since independence, the physical persecution of the Christian community began during General Zia's regime when Blasphemy Laws were amended,⁴⁸ while attacks against these communities increased after the American invasion of Afghanistan post 9/11.⁴⁹

A Critical Appraisal of Interfaith Dialogue in Contemporary Lahore

Though Lahore has a rich historical tradition of interfaith harmony, interaction, and dialogue, this has waned since independence because the present generation is less familiar with people of other faiths and has a narrow knowledge of the 'religious other' as compared to earlier generations who lived, studied or worked with Hindus, Sikhs, Parsis, Jains, Jews and Buddhists in Lahore. Interfaith dialogue between peoples of different faith traditions thus becomes imperative and its effectiveness becomes critical to

³⁹ Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, "*Asbab-e-Baghawat-e-Hind*" (Lahore: Mazbua-e-Mustafa-e-Press Lahore, 17).

⁴⁰ Tahir Masood, "Urdu Works of Dr. Charles W Forman", *The Nation*, March, 05, 2014, <http://nation.com.pk/national/05-Mar-2014/urdu-works-of-dr-charles-w-forman>

⁴¹ G.C. Walker, Esquire, *Gazetteer of the Lahore District 1893-94* (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 2006), 92-97.

⁴² G.C. Walker, Esquire, *Gazetteer of the Lahore District 1893-94* (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 2006), 92-97.

⁴³ *The Times*, "Travails of The Mecca of Suburbia", March, 29, 2008, <http://www.shahjahanmosque.org.uk/travails-mecca-suburbia> (Accessed 20 September, 2016).

⁴⁴ Harvard University Gazette, "Wilfred Cantwell Smith", November, 29, 2001, <http://news.harvard.edu/gazette/2001/11.29/27-memorialminute.html> (Accessed 12 April, 2016).

⁴⁵ William Dalrymple, "The Great Divide", *The New Yorker*, June, 22, 2015.

⁴⁶ Ishtiaq Ahmad, Adnan Rafiq, ed., *Pakistan's Democratic Transition Change and Persistence*, (New York: Routledge, 2017), 128-171.

⁴⁷ Rasul Bakhsh Rais, "Pluralism under stress", *The Express Tribune*, August, 13, 2012.

⁴⁸ Roger Ballard, *The Christians of Pakistan: A Historical Overview and an Assessment of their Current Position* (United Kingdom: CASAS, 2015), 9.

⁴⁹ Tina Mercep, "Pakistan: Opportunities and Threats to the Development of a Pluralistic Society", Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, June, 29, 2016. <http://www.kas.de/bruessel/de/publications/45961/> (Accessed 18 August 2016)

rebuilding religious harmony.

Since the clergy leads dialogue, communication is limited to a pastor and an imam, and mostly similarities are discussed while differences in beliefs and practices are avoided. This segmentation of participants along religious lines and concentration on theological issues in the dialogue prompted responses from multiple interviewees. A senior social activist stated that “the parameters of dialogue are wrong as the people meet on the basis of beliefs but they should meet on humanitarian grounds” while another respondent stated that the main focus of dialogue should be on social issues instead of theological ones. An interviewee suggested that “dialogue should be based on local cultural values because cultural festivals have more commonalities and bind people together.”

However, this requires a certain level of openness among the participants. But the majority of respondents said that there was no openness even among the progressive people of the majority community on religious issues. A respondent said, “People from the religious minority, even leaders and bishops are afraid to talk openly on theological issues in these meetings.” Thus, these meetings do not address the issue of mistrust that still exists and the conversation remains cosmetic. One respondent stated “once some government officials came to participate in an interfaith dialogue organized by a local church. They were offered food but regrettably they refused to eat. This incident not only hurt our feelings but also destroyed the mutual trust which was built through this meeting.”

Effective interfaith dialogue also requires a certain level of equality among participants. But socio-economic disparity between religious communities leads to a gap in the dialogue process especially when the minority community is socially, economically, politically, and legally much weaker than the majority community. To highlight this fact, one respondent stated that “the majority community behaves in a way that they dominate the dialogue meetings”.

Another overlooked factor is the intra-faith dialogue that is crucial to promoting interfaith dialogue but

is not being practiced because of the risk of reaction from within own communities. Further, there is a minimal participation of Hindus, Sikhs, and Bahá'ís in these dialogues, partly because of their minute numbers in Lahore and also because of xenophobic hostilities against India. Lastly, the Ahmadiyya community is totally deprived of participation in the dialogue as was confirmed through participant observations and interviews. There is also minimal participation of women in dialogue meetings, even though their role is vital in promoting interfaith relations. This was underscored by a participant who stated that “when families come together for a dialogue, it can be more fruitful. The food, clothes, colors and festivals, commonalities and social issues must be the basis of our dialogue.”

Additionally, almost all respondents said that dialogue meetings mostly took place in luxury hotels and thus the fruits of dialogue were not conveyed to the common people. There is little effort to hold these dialogues in mosques and churches.

Role of the State:

Almost all respondents showed their dissatisfaction regarding the existing institutional support of the state to promote interreligious relations. One respondent said that “when any bad incident happens, only then the government ministers appear.” This was attested by a respondent from the Lahore Deputy Commissioner's office who said that “we have a ‘District Peace Committee’ and if any interreligious conflict happens, then we involve religious leaders to manage interreligious conflicts. But mostly, this committee meets before the month of Muharram to manage law and order situation regarding sectarian violence.” The lack of state's commitment towards supporting interfaith harmony can be understood from the absence of interfaith committees at the union council level which one of the respondents described as “one of the major reasons for interreligious conflict.” Ironically, the Ministry of Religious Affairs & Interfaith Harmony mainly deals with Hajj applications.

Conclusion & Policy Recommendations

Lahore has a rich history of interfaith dialogue that

most people are unaware of because interreligious dialogue spaces have gradually shrunk since Partition. Whereas the constituency of interfaith dialogue exists, research findings suggest that most dialogue organizers and participants do not understand the very concept of interfaith dialogue and its various forms i.e. dialogue of life; dialogue of deed, and dialogue of religious experience. Thus, interfaith dialogue which is currently taking place can be categorized more as a diatribe or a monologue among a select group of people, who seem to be repeatedly invited.

Unfortunately, because of a lack of state support and a lack of conviction by society, the current dialogue activities are not self-sustaining and are mostly based on foreign funding. Thus, interfaith dialogue has primarily become a project-based activity rather than being considered a mission, or a social, religious, and national responsibility. To reorient and restructure the nature of this current pattern of interfaith dialogue, following is recommended.

Develop a Framework for Interfaith Dialogue in the

Local Context: To improve the effectiveness of and broaden the framework of interfaith dialogue, the dos and don'ts of interfaith dialogue need to be comprehended; the importance of listening and respecting the 'other'; the need to include women, youth and families; to move beyond theology to also include socio-cultural and political issues; and to acknowledge diversity through joint celebrations of cultural and religious festivals such as Basant, melas, Holi, Dewali, Eid, Christmas, Bisakhi, Nowruz and others.

Institutionalize Interfaith Dialogue Process at the Local Level:

State and civil society should work together to institutionalize interfaith dialogue at the union council level through the formation of peace committees. The interaction of local representatives with various religious communities on a sustained basis will help eliminate violence at the grassroots level through pinpointing and removal of hate literature and hate speech.

The state should also support the production of interfaith dialogue guidelines and peace literature while providing neutral venues to the peace committee for

dialogue and community interaction.



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Seminar Series

:Dr. Ayra Indrias Patras, a CPPG Alumni and Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science, Forman Christian College, was invited to discuss her book *Swept Aside A Story of Christian Sweepers in Lahore* (Lahore: Folio, 2023) on February 20, 2023. She was joined by two discussants: Neelam Hussain, an educationist and researcher, and Dr. Asad ur Rehman, an Assistant Professor at Forman Christian College.



Introducing her book, Patras shared that it has already been substantiated in existing literature that religious minorities in Pakistan have been marginalized on a social, political, and economic level. Her book further investigates the intersection between caste, class, gender and religion under the broad rubric of Subaltern Studies, which identify colonial populations that are socially, politically and economically excluded from the hierarchy of power. She highlighted the historical structures and forces that have shaped Christian communities as religious minorities and subdued class communities. More so, she argued that there was stigmatization within the Christian communities as well, based on existing class divisions and other contours which highlighted the need for researching this topic. Through her research, she has brought forward the voices of those who navigate through this uneven terrain eclipsed by various strands of marginality, and social and class divisions.

Patras' book focuses on the way waste management is structured in Pakistan in relations to lower-hierarchy women workers engaged in janitorial services. It also explains how women traverse the challenging landscapes of caste and social disparities. Shedding light