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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

on the relationship of people who are on the fringes of the state, she explained the perspective of citizenship in the minds of these communities and how they related it to nationalism. Finally, the book delves deeper into the response of church institutions to the challenges faced by the Christian community.

Elaborating on the topic, Patras pointed out that more than 90 percent workers in WASA and public schools belonged to the Christian community. Initially, the domain of janitorial services came under the public sector. However, in 2010, it was leased to Turkish companies which subleased it to private companies. This multiple leasing structure was quite disadvantageous for the sweeper community as it deprived the community of job security, pension, and medical care, leading to further alienation along with socio-economic poverty. She identified the gaps between private companies' contracts and practices and remarked that these companies are duty-bound to provide safety standards, free meals and medical needs to workers. But these workers are not aware of their labor rights and their ignorance is further played up by their weak social position in society.

Patras further discussed the absence of technological innovation in janitorial services and the discrimination faced by women workers in their workplaces. The process of cleaning is still manual and strenuous with continuous exposure to dust affecting the health of workers and leading them to death traps. Further, the non-availability of public toilets for women is another case of inequity. Moreover, in the past, women workers were in larger numbers. But the hierarchy of private companies has contracted women employment opportunities in this janitorial occupation. Thus, the new liberal employment design, which aimed to counter capitalism's unregulated and hostile conditions for laborers, has been unable to discontinue the discrimination and exploitation faced by the workforce. Instead, it is playing havoc with the everyday realities of sanitary workers.

Highlighting the salience of caste in Pakistani society, she observed that the society conveniently discards the notion of caste division. Caste division is mostly understood as an Indian/Hindu phenomenon, because

it is argued that Pakistan is an egalitarian society based on Islamic principles which doesn't allow caste division. However, it must not be forgotten that caste has been recognized as a category of governance in colonial administration and governmentality. Caste governs our social and political behavior, influencing voting patterns and socio-political transactions. It is present in the corridors of bureaucracy and comes across all classes. Class mobility is relatively easier than changing one's caste. Hence, to deny the existence of caste means closing one's eyes in the face of a major societal discriminatory structure.



Such divisions are evident when we look closely at the experience of Christian minorities. They are kept separated at workplaces, their utensils are separated and they face various other forms of discriminatory practices. These practices instill alienation, perpetuate victimhood, and obstruct their political agency for social action. These behaviors and practices took root in colonial history where the Chura caste, as recorded by missionaries, was considered the untouchables. They were known for their dirty work. The rising number of Christian sanitary workers from 4,000 in 1871 to 5 lakh in Punjab by 1941, is not only because of historical recruitment practices but also the persistence of policies which declare this work as an "untouchable caste occupation." This caste-based Chura identity has had an adverse impact on the Christian identity as this vulnerability and marginality have served as a sight of deprivation, rather than of resistance. Internalized victimization and lack of political agency have brought no change in their lives, making it imperative for us to look at the concept and issues of minorities, and their marginalization from a holistic point of view.