

PURIFYING THE LAND OF THE PURE

In the back drop of sharp discourses on Freedom of religion or belief and Freedom of expression as an inalienable Human Right, there is an alarming increase in the incidents of violence in the name of religion or belief. This violence which is aimed at acquiescence and mute submission of individuals and groups in societies has put the Freedom of expression in jeopardy. The common persons aside, intellectuals, writers and opinion makers with a secular and enlightened outlook have been the regular target of this violence. In Bangladesh several eminent University professors have been brutally assassinated in recent times. In the same vein, religious minorities and sects are regularly being targeted in other parts of South Asia.

In a gruesome attack on an Easter gathering in Gulshan-i-Iqbal Park in Lahore (Pakistan) recently more than 70 people including many women and children were killed. It is not for the first time that Christian minority has been targeted in that country. They have been repeatedly at the receiving end of the extremists of different hues and shades and have been bearing the brunt of their attacks in different parts of the country. According to Farahanaz Ispahani, author and former member of Pakistan Parliament, who recently wrote a book on minorities in Pakistan *Purifying the Land of the Pure* that "by attacking Christians celebrating Easter, the terrorists are continuing their quest to purify Pakistan of all religious minorities and those who do not conform to their limited vision." Later, the spokesperson of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan claimed the responsibility for this attack. On the other count, the Christians in Pakistan have been facing cases filed against them under the controversial Blasphemy Laws. These laws were promulgated by the Martial Law dictator, Zia-ul-Haq when he assumed power in 1980's.

The situation for other religious minorities including Islamic sects is no more different. *Ahmadiyahs* have already been declared as non-

Muslims. Shia Muslims are being regularly targeted and thousands of Shia men women and children are being killed on a regular basis. Their places of worship and congregations, mosques and *Imambaras* are vandalized by the well organized and armed extremists.

This state of affairs is grossly violating the human right of religion or belief and right of freedom of expression of individuals and the groups of people. It points to the failure of state to defend the human rights of its own citizens.

There is an ongoing debate in Pakistan society as to what has led to this state of affairs. There is a section of society which attributes it to the text books and curriculum in schools which has nourished an orthodox and extremist attitude of mind. However, the lack of a political will is preventing the official authorities to address this very issue. However, the ominous manifestation of building up such a mental attitude particularly among the younger sections of population should prod the state to have a serious look on the issue. The State should recognize that this state of affairs, if not controlled has the potential to push the state and society in a vortex of turmoil and violence on a large scale which would not be easily controlled.

Riyaz Punjabi