

Caste and Exclusion: Dalits in Contemporary Pakistan

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This article examines the systemic caste discrimination of Dalits (untouchables) in Pakistan, an overlooked topic even when the country has a constitutional mandate of equality. Based on historical analysis and interviews with Dalit activists, it reveals entrenched barriers in education, healthcare, and political participation. Legislative initiatives, including the Sindh Hindus Marriage Act (2018), are present but fail because they are weakly enforced and institutionally ignored. In contrast to India-centric caste studies, the research provides an innovative angle through the study of caste in the context of Muslim-majority populations, combining religion and minority rights in the discourse. By taking a Dalit-centred approach, it draws attention to the gap between protection given by law and actual experience, advocating for land rights, gender equality, and social inclusion. The research expands human rights and social justice research, suggesting improved legal protections, specific socio-economic policies, and increased Dalit political representation. It calls for an enhanced examination of caste relations in Muslim societies, contending that confronting this exclusion is crucial to getting Pakistan's law on the same page as its ideology of justice and equity. This paper emphasises the imperative of policy change and additional research to close the gap between promise and performance.

Keywords: caste discrimination, Dalits, Pakistan, scheduled castes, minority rights

Introduction

You are free; you are free to go to your temples; you are free to go to your mosques or to any other place of worship in this State of Pakistan. You may belong to any religion or caste or creed that has nothing to do with the business of the State.

Quaid-e-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah

The research highlights the historical background of the origin of the caste system, which has impacted countries like India, Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka.

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Those who suffer from caste discrimination are often referred to as ‘Dalits’, a term meaning downtrodden, oppressed, or untouchables. While the oppression faced by Dalits has been extensively studied in some of these countries, there is very little documentation on Dalits in Pakistan, where they are officially recognised as ‘Scheduled Castes’ (SHAH 2007). Pakistan denies the existence of caste-based discrimination, asserting that Islam promotes equality and, therefore, caste discrimination has no place in an Islamic country (IDSN 2008). The Constitution’s preamble defines Pakistan as ‘a democratic state based on Islamic principles and social justice’. However, Quaid-e-Azam, the founder of Pakistan, explicitly addressed the Hindu caste system, guaranteeing that lower-caste Hindus would have equal rights and status in Pakistani society. In his address to the Constituent Assembly on 11 August 1947, Jinnah invoked ‘caste’ three times, declaring: ‘You may belong to any religion or caste or creed that has nothing to do with the business of the State’ (AHMAD s. a.: 403–404). The symbolic embodiment of this commitment was Jogendra Nath Mandal, a Dalit leader whom Jinnah appointed to chair the Assembly’s inaugural session and serve as Pakistan’s first Minister of Law (ASIF 2020). This paper argues that caste-based exclusion in Pakistan operates through three interconnected mechanisms: legal vulnerability, economic, and social stigma. While each manifests differently through blasphemy accusations, bonded labour, forced conversions, and barriers to education and healthcare, they collectively reinforce a system of structural discrimination that persists despite constitutional guarantees of equality. These mechanisms do not operate in isolation: legal vulnerability enables economic exploitation; economic dependence prevents civic participation and resistance to forced conversion; and social stigma justifies continued legal neglect. By examining these intersecting dimensions through the lived experiences of Dalit communities and activist voices, this study reveals how formal legal protections fail to translate into substantive rights when institutional enforcement remains weak and social hierarchies remain deeply embedded.

This research paper aims to examine the complex realities of Dalits in Pakistan, with a focus on the challenges they face and the structural changes required to amplify their voices in the larger narrative of the country (JILLANI 2013). As Pakistan became a nation, it developed a constitution and legal measures designed to safeguard the rights of religious minorities, as well as those belonging to marginalised communities (MALIK 2002). However, these measures were insufficient to erode the mechanisms of institutionalised discrimination that Dalits continue to experience. Despite efforts to implement legal safeguards, challenges persist, and enforcement remains far from adequate (MEHFOOZ 2021).

The research provides a comprehensive assessment of the various complex aspects of life as a Dalit in Pakistan. It demonstrates the multiplicity of caste-based prejudices impacting on a range of domains including education, healthcare, mobility, political

engagement, culture, etc. Even preliminary results indicate that Pakistan's frequency and degree of discrimination differ considerably from those in India, where the caste system maintained by the Hindu majority leads to more overt and frequent discrimination. In contrast, Pakistan experiences a different dynamic where inequality against minority communities, including Dalits, is not as intense or frequent. Through key findings and the direct voices of influential figures from the Dalit community, this study seeks to amplify their experiences, providing a platform for their stories to be heard.

The significance of the study

This research addresses a critical gap by focusing on the Dalit community in Pakistan, a group often overlooked in public discourse and policy frameworks. By combining historical context with contemporary analysis, it reveals the systemic nature of caste-based exclusion. The research will contribute to the academic and public policy literature, documenting Dalit activist voices, detailing and recording grassroots efforts, and assessing state-led work. The outcomes of the research are to make policy-makers, civil society actors, and the international human rights community aware of the need for a holistic response that includes proactive and targeted action, with enforceable laws and meaningful representation to uphold the rights and dignity of Dalit in Pakistan.

Research objectives

This research pursues four interconnected objectives: first, to explore historical and contemporary experiences of caste discrimination endured by Dalits in Pakistan; second, to evaluate the efficacy of government policies and laws designed to protect Dalits; third, to highlight the role of Dalit-led activism in advancing social justice; and finally, to elevate the voices and lived experiences of Dalits to inform policy-making and public discourse.

Research questions

To achieve these objectives, this research addresses four central questions. What are the principal socio-economic, political, and legal barriers confronting Dalits in Pakistan? How effective are constitutional protections and the legislative framework in addressing caste-based discrimination? How do Dalit activist movements and community organisations combat marginalisation? And how does caste operate in the lived experiences of Dalits within an overwhelmingly Muslim-majority society where caste is often officially denied, yet continues to shape social relations?

Literature review

Historical perspective of casteism

Pre-Partition

The caste system in South Asia traces back over 2,000 years and is deeply embedded in religious and social ideologies, particularly within Hindu scriptures such as the Rigveda and Manusmriti (SONAWANI 2017).

The Rigveda, an ancient Hindu text, contains references to social divisions centred around occupations and social roles. It delineates society into four varnas or classes: the *Brahmins* (priests and scholars), *Kshatriyas* (warriors and rulers), *Vaishyas* (merchants and farmers), and *Shudras* (labourers and servants). This early classification based on occupation laid the foundation for the hierarchical structure of society (JOHNSON–JOHNSON s. a.).

Those outside this hierarchy, Dalits were referred to as varna-sankara, they are seen as outsiders or beyond the system, considered so inferior that they are considered ‘untouchable’ and deemed to cause pollution to higher-caste individuals (AMBEDKAR 1916). The Manusmriti, also known as the Laws of Manu, is another influential text that played a significant role in shaping the caste system.

Arya Samaj, an influential reformist movement, also played a role in shaping Hindu nationalist ideology. The movement aimed to bring back those who converted to other religions (such as Christianity and Islam) back to via Shuddhi (purification) and Sangathan (unity) campaigns, laying ideological groundwork for modern ‘ghar wapsi’ (home coming) movements (KRISHNAMURTHI–KRISHNASWAMI 2021). However, inherent contradictions are evident in the writings and practices of Hindu nationalist leaders, many of whom belonged to the Brahmin elite. On the one hand, they rejected the caste system as a societal bane, yet on the other hand, they asserted the superiority of the Arya race and emphasised the importance of the caste system for maintaining social structure and Hindu identity (JOHNSON–JOHNSON s. a.).

Leaders like Dayananda, the founder of Arya Samaj, and V. D. Savarkar, the father of Hindutva, glorified the historical virtues of the caste system while also calling for a rejection of its hereditary nature. Golwalkar, another influential figure in Hindutva, defended the caste system as essential to the concept of a Hindu nation state, advocating for varna (caste) as a reflection of nature (SATHAYE 2015).

This emphasis on Vedic Aryanism and biological racism, similar to European theories of racial superiority, has led to the exclusion and marginalisation of ‘untouchable’ and lower-caste groups, including Dalits, from the narrative of a glorious Hindu civilisation (DULEEP 2012).

Overall, Hindu nationalism has fused caste supremacy with religious exclusivity. This caste system and its implications on the Dalit community remain significant challenges that need to be addressed to move towards a more inclusive and equitable society

(KISHWAR 2000). Despite partition and the creation of a Muslim-majority Pakistan, caste hierarchies persisted, adapting to new socio-political realities.

Post-partition

The hierarchical caste system, rooted in Hinduism, has deeply entrenched itself in South Asian societies, affecting even adherents of egalitarian religions like Islam, Sikhism, Christianity, and Buddhism (MEHFOOZ 2021).

Caste has long been a significant social phenomenon across the Indian subcontinent (BENATAR 2019). The All India Scheduled Castes Federation (AISCF), led by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, sought to secure rights and social justice for the marginalised Dalit communities in British India, which included both present-day India and Pakistan. However, the specific evolution of caste in Pakistan diverged from that of India due to the country's unique historical, political, and cultural context (RAGHAVAN 2020).

In 1944, Mohammad Ali Jinnah pledged that the Muslim League would safeguard Dalit rights, and post-partition, Pakistan's social structure emphasised religion over caste (GAZDAR 2007). Though less pervasive than in India, caste-based discrimination endured (HASAN 2009). A notable figure in this narrative is Jogendra Nath Mandal, a Dalit leader who became Pakistan's first Law Minister in 1947, symbolising early inclusion efforts (BAXI et al. 2006). However, rising intolerance in the post-Jinnah era prompted his resignation and migration to India in 1953, leaving Dalits at the bottom of the social hierarchy (GAZDAR 2007). Many Dalits remained in Pakistan after partition, facing insecurity during the 1965 and 1971 wars and lacking resources to migrate (FARUQI 2011).

In 1957, the Scheduled Castes (Declaration) Ordinance recognised 40 non-Muslim castes primarily Hindus as Scheduled Castes (SHAH 2007). However, this percentage diminishes to one percent when evaluated at the national level (BENATAR 2019). Affirmative action followed, including a 6% job quota for Scheduled Castes in provincial departments, reduced to 1% nationally (BENATAR 2019). This quota ended in 1998, leaving Dalits without substantial protections (MALIK 2002).

Dalits in Pakistan

Demography of Scheduled Caste in Pakistan

In Pakistan, the landscape of caste demography is characterised by a diverse array of approximately 40 distinct castes, with 32 of them being formally designated as scheduled castes under the November 1957 Presidential ordinance. Among these scheduled castes are notable communities such as Meghwars, Bheels, Kolhis, Baghris, Kori, Kuchria, Pasi, Perna, Ramdasi and others (BOIVIN 2008). This categorisation must be understood within Pakistan's broader socio-religious context. While the country is home to Dalit Muslims, the prevailing belief within Islam asserts the absence of caste hierarchies among Muslims. Consequently, the scheduled castes are predominantly

associated with Hindu communities, reflecting the influence of upper-caste supremacy that has historically constrained lower-caste individuals into the Hindu category, despite indigenous identities (MEHFOOZ 2021).

Demographically, the Scheduled Castes population has seen significant growth over the years. In 1998, it was estimated at 0.33 million (0.25% of the total population), surging to 0.85 million (0.41%) by 2017, a 157.58% increase (0.52 million individuals) with an average growth rate of 5.11%. Geographically, Sindh recorded a rise from 0.30 million to 0.83 million, while Punjab saw a decline from 0.02 million to 0.01 million, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa experienced a modest increase from 0.0006 million to 0.0008 million (ASLAM et al. 2022).

Digital census 2023 population insights

The 2023 digital census, Pakistan's first fully digital count using tablets and GIS for real-time monitoring, recorded a total population of 240,458,089 (excluding Azad Kashmir and Gilgit- Baltistan). It reported 1,349,487 Scheduled Castes (0.56% of the population), with 1,325,559 in Sindh, indicating a rural concentration (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics 2023). However, activists and academics, such as those cited by the International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN), argue that these figures undercount Dalits, potentially numbering millions, due to systemic issues in census methodology that also affected the 2017 count, impacting political representation and resource access (IDSN s. a.). Additionally, the distinction of 'Scheduled Castes' from the broader Hindu community has deepened divisions. While some adopt a Hindu identity to avoid further marginalisation, others emphasise maintaining the distinction to highlight caste-based discrimination (RUFUS 2024).

Mechanisms of exclusion

Despite attempts at curbing discrimination and enacting legal protection for minority rights within Pakistan, significant challenges remain. This section analyses Dalit exclusion through three interconnected mechanisms: legal vulnerability, economic marginalisation, and social stigma demonstrating how these dimensions reinforce one another. It is important to note that these issues are predominantly prevalent in rural areas where a significant portion of the population lacks literacy and awareness about human rights, and discriminatory practices are primarily conducted by some segments of the upper-class Hindu population (SIKAND 2022; HASAN 2009).

Legal vulnerability

Legal vulnerability refers to the condition in which Dalits lack effective access to legal protection and face heightened exposure to legal persecution. Minority women are particularly vulnerable to false blasphemy accusations, leading to legal persecution and

mob violence. The case of Aasia Bibi illustrates this vulnerability. A Christian woman from Punjab, Aasia Bibi was accused of blasphemy in 2009 after a dispute with Muslim co-workers over drinking water, during which her Christian faith was deemed to have contaminated a shared vessel. She was arrested and sentenced to death in 2010. Her case highlighted the systemic vulnerabilities of religious minorities in Pakistan, especially Dalit Christians, who are frequently subjected to discrimination and false accusations. After years on death row, Pakistan's Supreme Court acquitted her in 2018 on grounds of insufficient evidence, yet she was forced to seek asylum abroad due to continued threats to her life (IWANEK 2018). Aasia Bibi's experience demonstrates how blasphemy laws function as a mechanism of legal vulnerability for Dalit women, intersecting with their economic marginalisation and social stigma to produce compounded exclusion.

The foundation of Pakistan's blasphemy laws dates back to the colonial era of British India, which includes the region now known as Pakistan. These laws were originally introduced to prevent religious violence between Hindus and Muslims. Key provisions established in 1860 include Sections 295, 296, 297, and 298, with Section 295-A added in 1927 to address deliberate insults to religious beliefs. Under General Zia-ul-Haq's military regime (1977–1988), the laws were amended to specifically address blasphemy against Islam, including:

- Section 295-B (1982): Punishing the desecration of the Quran
- Section 295-C (1986): Criminalising any defilement of the Prophet Muhammad's name, carrying the death penalty
- Section 298-A (1980): Criminalising defiling the names of the Prophet Muhammad's family, companions, or caliphs
- Sections 298-B and 298-C (1984): Specifically targeting the Ahmadiyya community, restricting their religious practices and self-identification as Muslims

Today, the most commonly invoked provisions include Sections 295-A, 295-B, 295-C, and 298-A. These laws allow police to arrest alleged offenders without a warrant and can initiate investigations without prior approval from a magistrate's court, making these laws susceptible to misuse (The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan 2012).

The connection to economic marginalisation is direct: families who cannot rely on legal protection have no recourse when trapped in exploitative labour arrangements or when facing forced conversion.

Economic marginalisation

Economic marginalisation traps Dalits in conditions of material deprivation and exploitative labour relations, reinforcing both legal vulnerability and social stigma. Sanitation work in Pakistan is predominantly carried out by the descendants of individuals from the Hindu Dalit caste, many of whom have converted to Christianity generations ago. Today, approximately 80% of sanitation workers in Pakistan are Dalit Christians, despite representing only 2% of the general population (ZAHID 2026).

This occupational segregation carries severe physical and psychological costs. Tasleem Mai, a 50-year-old sanitary worker who has supported her family of 12 for twenty-five years, took on this work due to the lack of other employment opportunities. Despite significant risks of infection and accidents, she seldom receives protective equipment, compensation for overtime, or medical check-ups. As she reflects: ‘We are always forced to compromise our dignity and personal well-being to do the job. We play an essential role in society, yet we are not compensated for overtime or leave.’ Her experience is representative of broader patterns: a socio-legal study on sanitation workers in Lahore found that 91% of female sanitation workers experienced stress or mental illness, compared to 74% of their male counterparts (ALI–AZEEM 2025). Economic dependence creates conditions where Dalits cannot resist forced conversion or report abuses, knowing they lack both economic alternatives and confidence in legal protection.

Social stigma and civic exclusion

Social stigma encompasses the cultural devaluation of Dalit identity that manifests in exclusion from education, healthcare, political participation, and protection against forced conversion. Pakistan has the world’s second highest number of out-of-school children, with 22.8 million children aged 5–16 not attending schools, representing 44% of this age group. Disparities are stark, with 5 million children aged 5–9 out of school and 11.4 million adolescents aged 10–14 lacking education. In Sindh, 52% of the poorest children (58% of them girls) are out of school, and in Balochistan, 78% of girls are not enrolled (FARAN–ZAIDI 2021). Vulnerable groups, including women, religious minorities, and bonded labourers, make up most of the illiterate population in these areas. According to estimates, less than 10% of Dalit girls have access to formal education (IDSN s. a.).

Caste-based exclusion from the health sector in Pakistan is not routinely documented, though there have been different instances reported related to upper-caste Hindus in rural areas. The right to healthcare as a Dalit can be impacted by caste discrimination amongst certain health practitioners. Likewise, these biases could ultimately result in poorer quality medical care and increased health disparities (HASAN 2009). The ability to participate in political structures across an elected government is little to no as Dalits are often discouraged from running for political positions and exercising their voting rights fully. Coercion may force them to vote for specific candidates, thereby compromising their democratic agency (SHAH 2007).

In Pakistan, forced conversion is one of the most severe forms of discrimination faced by religious minorities, including Hindus and Christians, especially women and girls. Forced conversions are often disguised as ‘marriage of choice’, where abducted girls are coerced into a new religious identity (Islam) under the false claim that the conversion is voluntary. However, these young girls are subjected to severe physical and psychological abuse to ensure their compliance (RAFIQ 2022). According to the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCPP), at least 136 cases of forced conversions were documented in 2023, the majority of whom were Hindu women and girls from the Sindh province.

Public protests have been organised by Dalit communities to address forced conversions. In March 2023, Dalit groups, including women and children from Scheduled Caste communities, held a rally in Karachi, starting at the Press Club and moving to the Sindh Assembly, demanding stronger protection for minority rights and action on forced conversions (ALI 2023). In April 2023, another protest took place in Diplo town, Tharparkar, following the alleged forced conversion of Hindu woman Summan Lohana. Reports indicated that Lohana was coerced into converting to Islam after a relationship with Sajjad Mehar, with protesters accusing controversial religious figures from Ghotki of facilitating such practices (Human Rights Commission of Pakistan 2025).

Religious hatred against other communities in Pakistan represents a disturbing and pervasive issue that significantly impacts their lives and well-being. As a minority community within a predominantly Muslim country, minority communities often face discrimination and prejudice on religious grounds. This discrimination manifests in various forms, including verbal abuse and social exclusion. Dalits are subjected to derogatory slurs and offensive language, which further marginalise them and reinforce their status as outsiders within their own society (USCIRF 2011).

Dalit community activism – Voices of local activists

In the pursuit of a deeper understanding of the often overlooked Dalit community in Pakistan, this review paper takes a pioneering step by engaging directly with the voices that resonate from within. Anchoring its authenticity in primary data, the paper draws upon a series of insightful interviews conducted with influential figures from the Dalit community. These interviews not only provide a unique perspective on the challenges and triumphs of the Dalit's lives, but also underscore the significance of real-life experiences in validating the research findings. The following are the voices from within the community.

Radha Bheel – CEO of Radha organisation and also the Chairperson of Dalit Sujag Tehreek, Pakistan

Radha discussed the treatment of Dalits across South Asia, noting that it is consistent in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. She argued that this discrimination is not solely social but also embedded in Hindu religious structures, where Dalits are considered Shudra by birth. Radha emphasised that humanity should take precedence over religious labels, urging for the recognition of Dalits as equal human beings.

In Pakistan, untouchability, while still present in Hindu communities, is less prominent due to the Muslim-majority population. Dalits represent around 95% of Pakistan's Hindu population, with Brahmins making up only about 5%. Although Dalits generally do not experience widespread violence, they face significant economic challenges that limit their political participation. Political parties often allocate seats to wealthier Hindus, marginalising economically disadvantaged Dalits.

Radha highlighted the importance of political representation for Dalits to allow them to make decisions that affect their lives. She also advocated for land rights, citing the vulnerability of Dalit lands to dispossession, particularly in disputes with landowners. Despite the efforts of provincial governments, legal organisations, and human rights institutions, she noted that the challenges faced by Dalits persist due to their marginalised status.

Pushpa Kumari – Human Rights and Dalit Activist, Member, Sindh Human Rights Commission, Pakistan

Pushpa Kumari identified the concurring problems faced by Dalit women as a result of gender, caste, and social position. She laid greater stress on patriarchal cultural norms and political leadership in creating asymmetrical relations of power within South Asia. Kumari criticised the marginal effectiveness of Dalit movements in Pakistan, especially Sindh, as a result of inadequate social backing, intra-party fissures, and ineffective lobbying. She emphasised the importance of grassroots actions to increase awareness, educate policy, and offer legal assistance.

Kumari mentioned there are no certain policies for the rights of Dalit women in Pakistan compared to other South Asian nations where similar programmes have been implemented. Without such policies, the protection of Dalit women's rights at the grassroots level is constrained. Though schemes such as the 6% quota for Scheduled Caste women were introduced, they did not guarantee equal employment opportunities because there was no representation in policy and budget meetings. Kumari supported more effective policy implementation, especially in Sindh. She also addressed gender equality and representation on political agendas. While other countries have done

a lot to advance the rights of women and their inclusion, efforts in Pakistan have been insufficient. Policies such as the 33% quota of seats for women must be addressed on a greater scale with marginalised groups as well. Kumari's words reflected the current situation and stressed the importance of policy-making on an inclusive platform.

Pirbhu Satyani – Human Rights Advocate and Regional Expert, IDSN, Pakistan

In an interview with Pirbhu Satyani, he discussed the major challenges faced by Dalits in Pakistan, drawing from his own experiences growing up in a lower-middle-class family in Mithi. Despite early setbacks such as a forced marriage and working as a labourer, his passion for education, supported by his mother, drove him forward. His involvement in various organisations highlighted the neglect of the most backward Scheduled Castes concerning their fundamental rights.

Satyani identified caste discrimination as a sensitive issue, particularly in Punjab, with little public discourse. His research on bonded labour in Sindh revealed social apathy towards caste discrimination (KHAN et al., 2009). However, he expressed hope for increased awareness and collective action both locally and internationally.

His work with UN mechanisms, including participation in the universal periodic review and involvement with the UN Stakeholders reporting team, showcased Pakistan's engagement in global human rights efforts. Satyani highlighted progress in Sindh, citing legislative changes such as the Sindh Child Marriage Restraint Act.

He also discussed the prevalence of religious hate, which disproportionately affects marginalised communities, including religious minorities and Scheduled Castes. He suggested that education reform and greater media representation could help address these issues. Satyani urged the UN to focus on conventions regarding human rights, child rights, and women's rights, advocating for international support for countries affected by caste discrimination.

Regarding census and representation, Satyani called for accurate enumeration of sub-castes and the citizenship status of the SC population. He emphasised the importance of campaigns focused on policy change through census data, noting the significance of political representation for SC members in Parliament as a turning point for social and political empowerment.

Dr. Sono Khangarani – CEO at Thardeep Microfinance Foundation, Pakistan

Dr. Sono Khangarani concentrated more on the historical context of Dalits in Pakistan, dating back to when Jogendra Nath Mandal held the prestigious position of the first minister of law of the newly established state. Dr. Khangarani appreciated positive developments by Pakistan towards safeguarding the rights of religious minorities as enshrined within the constitution, and ensuring freedom of association and expression to them. He appreciated the latest legislation making family laws disallow underage marriages among minority groups, thereby excluding forced conversions and weddings.

Besides, he emphasised the importance of quotas for reserved seats in public services and the allocation of 5% of the institutional employment seats exclusively for minorities, including Dalits. Dr. Khangarani put emphasis on the access of minorities to quality education and employment opportunities.

As compared to the Indian context, he refers to the rise of Hindutva ideology as a great threat to the minorities and indicates the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)'s strategic adoption of Dalit rituals for political reasons. He demands notice to what Christians, Muslims, and Dalits have faced by way of atrocities, a great deal composed of grave violations of human rights, and to the shrinking room in the broader South Asian context for minorities and particularly those outside the majoritarian view. In proposals, Dr. Khangarani calls for the reinstatement of the 6% quota for scheduled castes in Pakistan – a policy that has been in place since 1956. He also calls for land rights for landless Dalit minorities and proposes legislation that would enable individuals to vote double, considering both their minority and Dalit status on equal terms.

Initiatives of the Pakistan Government

Federal legislation for minorities

Protection of minorities has always remained a part of Pakistan's constitution. From its very beginning, the nation has understood the need to protect the rights of minority groups and has gone out of its way to include and protect them. These efforts have been made in order to prevent any type of discrimination against minority communities and to create a society where all citizens, irrespective of their religious or ethnic affiliation, can contribute to the social, political, and economic life of the country to their full potential (WILSON et al. 2020).

The following are the constitutional provisions concerning freedom of religion or belief and minority rights in Pakistan (Minority Rights Group International s. a.). It reflects Jinnah's founding vision of caste-based equality. Notably, the word 'caste' appears explicitly in three articles (22, 26, and 27) as a protected category alongside race, religion, and sex demonstrating that Pakistan's founders recognised caste-based discrimination as requiring specific constitutional remedy. These provisions address the three mechanisms of exclusion identified in this paper: Article 36 and 25 establish legal protection for minorities; Articles 20, 21, 22, and 26 guarantee religious freedom and equal access to education and public spaces, addressing social stigma; and Article 27 prohibits caste-based discrimination in government employment, addressing economic marginalisation.

Article 36

'The state shall safeguard the legitimate rights and interests of minorities, including their due representation in the Federal and Provincial services.'

Article 20 – Subject to law, public order and morality

- a) All citizens should possess the right to profess, practise, and spread their religion.
- b) Every religious group and sect shall have the right to build, govern, and administer its religious institutions.

Article 21 – Safeguard against taxation for purposes of any particular religion

No individual should be obligated to pay any specific tax whose revenues are designated for the promotion or sustenance of a religion other than their own.

Article 22 – Safeguards as to educational institutions in respect of religion, etc.

1. No individual enrolled in any educational institution will be compelled to receive any instruction, participate in any religious ceremony, or attend religious worship if such teaching, ceremony, or worship pertains to a faith other than their own.

2. No community will face discrimination regarding the provision of tax exemptions or concessions for any religious organisation.
3. Subject to law:
 - a) No religious community or denomination shall be obstructed from delivering religious instruction to its pupils in any educational institution entirely maintained by that community or denomination; and
 - b) No citizen shall be denied admission to any educational institution funded by public revenues solely on the basis of race, religion, caste, or place of birth.
4. This Article does not exclude any public authority from implementing measures for the development of any socially or educationally disadvantaged segment of persons.

Article 25 – Equality of citizens

1. All citizens are equal under the law and are entitled to equal legal protection.
2. Discrimination based on sex is prohibited.
3. This Article does not exclude the state from enacting particular measures for the protection of women and children.

Article 26 – Non-discrimination in respect of access to public places

1. Access to venues of public enjoyment or recreation not designated solely for religious reasons must not discriminate against any person based solely on race, religion, caste, sex, domicile, or place of birth.
2. Clause (1) must not be interpreted as prohibiting the state from enacting particular provisions for women and children.

Article 27(1) – Safeguard against discrimination in services

1. No citizen of Pakistan, otherwise eligible for appointment to the service of Pakistan, will be discriminated against in their appointment to any such service merely on the basis of race, religion, caste, sex, domicile, or place of birth.

However, the existence of these comprehensive protections paradoxically illustrates this paper's central argument about legal vulnerability. The gap between constitutional guarantee and lived reality remains vast: despite Article 27's prohibition of caste-based discrimination in services, Dalits remain concentrated in sanitation work; despite Article 22's educational protections, less than 10% of Dalit girls access formal education; and despite Article 36's mandate for representation, Dalits remain politically marginalised. This reveals that legal vulnerability operates not through the absence of protective laws but through their non-enforcement enabling economic marginalisation and reinforcing social stigma.

Legislative measures by the government of Sindh

The majority of the Hindu population (primarily Dalits) in Pakistan lives in rural Sindh. This serves to highlight the significance of legislations and initiatives of the Government of Sindh towards addressing the problems of minorities. The Sindh Department of Minority Affairs has a variety of specific objectives: to safeguard the rights of minority community members, ensure access to legal provisions, advance their well-being through decent living, health, education, and employment opportunities, and protect minorities from direct or indirect discrimination in employment, accommodation, or access to public services (Government of Sindh 2020).

The Sindh Hindus Marriage (Amended) Act 2018

The Sindh Hindus Marriage (Amended) Act of 2018 is a significant legislative achievement for the protection of the rights and interests of the Hindu community in Sindh. The primary purpose of this act is to introduce a formal and organised process for the registration of Hindu marriages and to rectify the issue of early-age marriages within the Hindu community. Implementation rules were notified on 27 November 2019, providing instructions and protocols for registration of Hindu marriages (Sindh Act No. VIII of 2018; Government of Sindh Notification No. SO(J-II)HD/2-46/2016, 2019).

Critical analysis: While the Act represents progress in formalising Hindu marriages, its effectiveness in protecting Dalit women remains limited. Marriage registration provides legal documentation that could theoretically protect against forced conversions disguised as marriages, a key concern identified in the ‘Mechanisms of exclusion’ subsection. However, activists note that rural Dalit communities often lack awareness of the registration process or access to registration offices. Furthermore, the Act does not address the underlying economic marginalisation that makes Dalit families vulnerable to coerced marriages in the first place. The legislation addresses symptoms of exclusion without tackling the interconnected mechanisms that produce it.

The Sindh Protection of Communal Properties of Minorities Act 2013

Sindh Protection of Communal Properties of Minorities Act of 2013 aims to safeguard properties owned collectively by minority communities for communal use. The act envisions a Provincial Commission for Minorities to issue No Objection Certificates (NOCs) for sale, purchase, and transfer of communal properties. Provincial Commission regulations were developed in 2019 after consulting with the Law Department, though proposed rules remain pending with the Non-Muslims Welfare Committee for approval before presentation to the Provincial Cabinet (Sindh Act No. XVII of 2013; JACOB 2021).

This legislation directly addresses the issue of economic marginalisation by protecting communal property – a particularly important issue in light of activist Radha Bheel’s statement that Dalit lands are at risk of appropriation. However, six years after the Act

was enacted, the implementing regulations have still not been approved, illustrating the gap between legislative intent and implementation that characterises Pakistan's approach to minority protection. Without a functioning Provincial Commission, the Act provides paper protection without practical remedy, reinforcing the pattern of legal vulnerability identified throughout this paper.

The Criminal Law (Protection of Minorities) Bill – 2015

The Criminal Law (Protection of Minorities) Bill 2015 attempts to address forced conversions affecting minority communities in Sindh. The bill establishes freedom of religion and acknowledges freedom of marriage and choice, emphasising individual autonomy in religion and relationships. It aims to create an environment of tolerance and harmonious coexistence among different communities. As of 2024, the bill remains in the legislative pipeline and has not been enacted into law (Human Rights Commission of Pakistan 2025). That this bill has remained pending for nearly a decade despite documented cases of forced conversion involving Dalit girls – as was mentioned in subsection 'Mechanisms of exclusion' – exemplifies the political obstacles to protecting marginalised minorities. The bill's limbo status reveals that legal vulnerability is not merely about enforcement failures but also about the political will to enact protective legislation in the first place. While 136 cases of forced conversion were documented in 2023 alone (Human Rights Commission of Pakistan 2024), the legislative remedy remains perpetually 'in the pipeline'. This pattern confirms that addressing Dalit exclusion requires not only stronger laws but also political representation to ensure such laws are actually passed and implemented.

Conclusion

This study has illustrated the persistent caste-based discrimination of Dalits in Pakistan, a long-standing issue that undermines the country's founding vision of equality and justice, as defined by Quaid-e-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah. In spite of constitutional protections and legislative attempts at safeguarding minority rights, Dalits – who are formally categorised as Scheduled Castes – continue to live in a society characterised by systemic socio-economic exclusion, restricted access to healthcare and education, political disenfranchisement, and exposure to forced conversion and accusations of blasphemy. These problems, while less apparent than in India, are firmly rooted in long-standing caste relations and socio-cultural patterns, especially in rural Sindh and southern Punjab, where most of Pakistan's Dalits live.

The analytical framework developed in this paper reveals that Dalit exclusion operates not through isolated forms of discrimination but through three interconnected mechanisms. Legal vulnerability manifested in weak enforcement and weaponisation of blasphemy laws enables economic exploitation. Economic marginalisation through bonded labour and occupational segregation traps Dalits in dependence that prevents

resistance. Social stigma expressed through educational exclusion and political disenfranchisement justifies both legal neglect and economic discrimination. Breaking this cycle requires simultaneous action across all three dimensions.

The research shows the fact that as much as federal and provincial efforts like the Sindh Hindus Marriage Act (2018) and the Criminal Law (Protection of Minorities) Bill (2015) indicate a willingness to protect marginalised groups, their efficacy is weakened by poor enforcement and lack of representation. The 2023 Digital Census of 1.35 million estimated Scheduled Caste population is a step towards increased visibility, though activists believe that it undercounts the actual extent of the Dalit population and restricts access to resources as well as voice in politics. Testimonies by Dalit activists such as Radha Bheel and Pushpa Kumari present the strength of grassroots movements that advocate for land rights, gender justice, and political participation in the face of economic inequalities and social opposition.

This research adds to justice and inclusion scholarship by foregrounding the lived experience of Pakistan's Dalits and revealing the mismatch between constitutionalism and daily reality. In order to bridge this lacuna, more effective enforcement of the current laws, socio-economic policies targeted at specific issues, and better political representation are the need of the hour. In the future, research may assess the success of government policies or examine how caste, gender, and religion intersect to form Dalit experiences. It is only through such consistent efforts that Pakistan can live up to Jinnah's dream of a country where creed and caste do not determine the rights and dignity of its citizens.

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