

Human Rights in Sindh: A Historic and Contemporary Perspective

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History

Sindh is an ancient country whose civilization stretches back to the earliest human settlements. The ancient Sindhi people embraced a peaceful way of life. Moenjodaro, a city that flourished in 2600 B.C., showed advanced city planning and well-developed arts, yet an absence of even basic military fortifications and weapons.



Moenjodaro: View from ritual bathing pool

Based on accounts of scholars who accompanied Alexander during his invasion of Sindh, the Roman philosopher Strabo described the Sindhi belief that God the Supreme Creator incites no war. Sindh was invaded by the Arabs in 712 A.D., a brutal conquest that was followed by the massacre of 6,000 POWs and the transportation of 30,000 young men and women sent into slavery—enormous numbers considering the total population at the time. Thirty-six years later, an insurrection restored the independence of Sindh.

Sindh remained independent for centuries following but suffered a series of attacks and occupations by Afghan and Indian rulers. One of the most traumatic of these attacks occurred in 1718: an army sent by the Delhi-based Mughal ruler attacked Jhoke, Sindh where Sufi Shah Inayat had established a society based on egalitarian and secular principles. Following a ruling by the orthodox mullahs, conquering Mughal troops executed over 16,000 Sindhi Sufis for heresy and apostasy. The site of mass graves of these martyrs, called Ganju, remains one of the most hallowed places of pilgrimage for Sindhis.

In 1843, the British colonized Sindh after an unprovoked attack on the sovereign country—an act that was widely criticized by many British leaders at the time. In 1936, the British held the first ever elections in Sindh; the election produced a staunchly secular legislature. In a subsequent election, gerrymandering and separate electorates for Hindus and Muslims, besides local political factors, allowed the sectarian Muslim League to win a bare majority in the Sindh Assembly—although the League received only about 40% of the popular vote.

In 1946, given only the choice of joining either India or Pakistan, the Sindh Assembly voted to join Pakistan. The decision was based on the 1940 Lahore Resolution; the Resolution stipulated "protection for minorities" and "sovereignty and autonomy" for constituent units. Pakistan has broken this covenant—it has oppressed religious minorities and imposed a militaristic Islamist dictatorship on the Sindhi people.

The Sindhi Diaspora

*I am a Sindhi
A homeless stray
Wandering place to place
--Popati Hiranandani,
Sindhi Poet and Writer*



Sindhis remained peaceful as the rest of Pakistan and parts of India were torn by riots in 1947. In January 1948—about four months after the creation of Pakistan—the federal government of Pakistan sponsored pogroms by refugees against Hindu Sindhis in Karachi, then the shared capital of Sindh and Pakistan. The pogroms resulted in the massacre of over 1200 Sindhis. When the Sindh government attempted to restore public order and return looted property, Pakistan removed the duly elected Sindh government from office.

The massacre and official expropriation of homes led to a mass exodus of Hindu Sindhis from urban centers, resulting in a Diaspora that now numbers over 2.5 million. Today, exiled Hindu Sindhis are denied the Right of Return. They are even denied visas to visit their holiest shrines—as these shrines are located in what is now Pakistan. Sindhi writers and poets in the Diaspora speak of

the pain of exile, and Sindhi writers in Sindh lament the loss of diversity in Sindhi society.



Carving at Saadha Belo Island Temple, Sindh—one of holiest Hindu Sindhi shrines. The shrine was vandalized by the Pakistani army in 1965.

The Rights of Minorities

Of the approximately 30 million Sindhis living in Sindh today, approximately 3 million are Hindus and suffer particularly under Pakistan's oppressive laws and discriminatory practices. Pakistan imposes the death penalty for blasphemy or apostasy. The definition of blasphemy includes ridiculing or criticizing fundamentalist Islamic beliefs; members of religious minorities are frequently charged with this crime.

The law and practices discriminate against minorities in other ways. In civil and criminal trials, the testimony of a witness belonging to a religious minority is deemed inherently untrustworthy. A non-Muslim man may not marry a Muslim woman. By law, members of the religious minorities cannot hold executive positions such as Mayor, Governor or President.

Hindu Sindhis have been made particularly insecure. Kidnapping for ransom of middle-class Sindhis is frequent in the province; the Pakistani police act particularly unconcerned about the treatment of Hindu victims. In January 2004, five people were kidnapped near Shahdatkot; within days, the police secured the release of four of the victims, but not of Vijay Kumar, the one Hindu among them.

In fact, the police have been accused of being active participants in the epidemic of kidnappings and looting in Sindh: in January 2004, in the village of Kabir Ghangri near Kandiaro, a 2am raid to loot and kidnap was re-

ported to have been carried out by the police while still in uniform. With the connivance of the Pakistani authorities, tens of thousands of Sindhis, including a disproportionately large number of Hindu and Christian Sindhis, are held in virtual slavery as bonded laborers.

The last census systematically undercounted the number of Sindhis. The census forms in Sindhi were simply printed in insufficient quantities so data could not be collected in many remote villages. In addition, Hindu Sindhis were intimidated by Pakistani soldiers who accompanied the census takers in Sindh. On the first day of the census, soldiers shot dead a 50 year-old Hindu Sindhi father in front of his teenage son. The electoral power of minorities has been further marginalized through gerrymandering and a system of separate electorates that is still in use in local elections.

In the eastern desert region of Sindh which borders India, Pakistani paramilitary forces have been periodically accused of violating fundamental human rights of Hindu Sindhis. The Pakistani government has designated homes and businesses of Hindu Sindhis in this area as 'Enemy Evacuee Property' and seized the legal deeds to their properties. On July 27, 2004, over 50 Sindhis fasted in a 'hunger strike' in Nangar Parkar, Sindh to protest Pakistani paramilitary and police forces in the region violating the chastity of women.

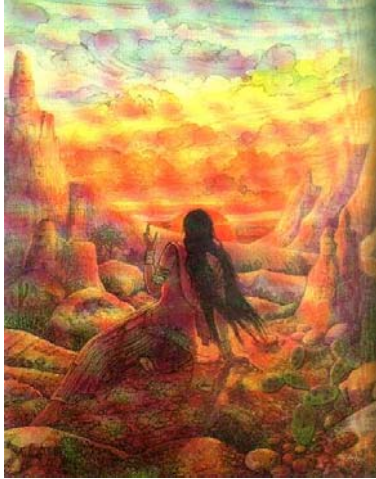
Islamic Studies has been made a compulsory subject for Muslims in all government and private schools. The officially mandated textbooks preach a fundamentalist and militant ideology, contravening the indigenous universalist Sufi beliefs of the Sindhis. The promotion of hatred and intolerance is not confined to textbooks for religious studies; it extends to even the language and history textbooks that are required in compulsory classes. In particular, the textbooks stereotype Hindus and Jews as 'conniving' and 'scheming.'

Hindu and Christian places of worship have been frequently ransacked by Islamic fundamentalists in different parts of Pakistan. A large number of Christians and Ahmadis—an Islamic heterodoxy accused of heresy by fundamentalists—have found refuge in Sindh. The Pakistani government has tried to extend the reach of its oppressive laws into Sindh's tolerant towns: in one case, a non-Sindhi judge in Karachi ordered the local police in Larkano, Sindh to charge an Ahmadi refugee with blasphemy for professing to be Muslim. On July 27, 2004, Rev. Khalid Soomro, a translator of the Bible into Sindhi, was attacked in Shikarpur, Sindh by members of a non-Sindhi Jihadi group for refusing to convert to Islam; his family was threatened and his house burned down. The

Pakistani government has also been accused of fomenting violence against Hindus by sending outside agitators into small towns and villages.

The Rights of Women

In traditional Sindhi culture and folklore, women are celebrated for their independent and adventurous spirit. Many Sindhi folktales are legends about heroines who defied family or social custom to choose their own marriage partners.



In a famous Sindhi folktale immortalized by the 17th century Sindhi poet Shah Latif, Sasui crosses an inhospitable desert and formidable mountain peaks in search of her kidnapped lover.

Pakistan has imposed harsh measures against women, for example, by denying their right to choose marriage partners and condoning so-called honor killings where relatives may kill an unrelated man and woman on the slightest suspicion of adultery—sometimes for so much as socializing, or for marrying outside the community. A historic account by Richard Burton in the 19th century contrasts the rarity of such killings in Sindh with their frequency in Afghanistan and the Middle-East. Today, encouraged by mullahs, about 300 young men and women are killed each year. For example, on June 22, 2004, 19 year-old Ms. Resham Junejo and 30 year-old Mr. Mukhtiar Junejo were killed in Garhi Yaseen, Sindh.

A woman who is raped must produce at least four Muslim eye-witnesses in court to prove her case. If she is impregnated by a rapist but cannot prove it, she is charged with the offence of adultery, punishable by death. It is estimated that the majority of women in prison today are charged with adultery. The net result of these oppressive conditions is to discourage the participation of women in civic life.

A woman may inherit only half as much as a man. A woman cannot be a judge in a Sharia court—courts that adjudicate cases of marriage, divorce, inheritance, blasphemy, apostasy, and other matters. Women are also

barred from the military—the institution that exercises the ultimate authority in Pakistan.

Freedom of the Press

Sindhi newspapers are generally supportive of democratic and secular values. Pakistan has used various overt and covert means to control these newspapers. One tool has been economic: Pakistan controls all public and private advertising in newspapers through a government body called the Pakistan Information Board. In 2003, the government ordered a cut in Sindhi newspapers' advertisement 'quota' by an additional 50%. Although Sindhi speakers account for about 20% of Pakistan's population, Sindhi newspapers now receive less than 1% of the total advertising revenue.



Press under a butcher's knife. The sleeve reads 'Government' (Cartoon in Sindhi Daily Kawish).

Pakistan has frequently banned Sindhi books, newspapers and magazines. In 1975, the largest circulation women's magazine Sojhiro (Daylight) was banned. In 1999, the largest circulation Sindhi monthly magazine Subhu Thindo ('A New Day will Dawn') was banned for spreading disaffection against the 'Islamic ideology of Pakistan.' The magazine focused on sustainable development and environmental protection. The government often uses violence and intimidation against journalists. For example, in August 2003, six Sindhi journalists covering a peaceful protest during the Pakistani dictator General Musharraf's visit to a college were arrested under 'anti-terrorism' laws. In the past two years, two journalists have been killed for covering corruption and the government has failed to aggressively pursue the crimes.

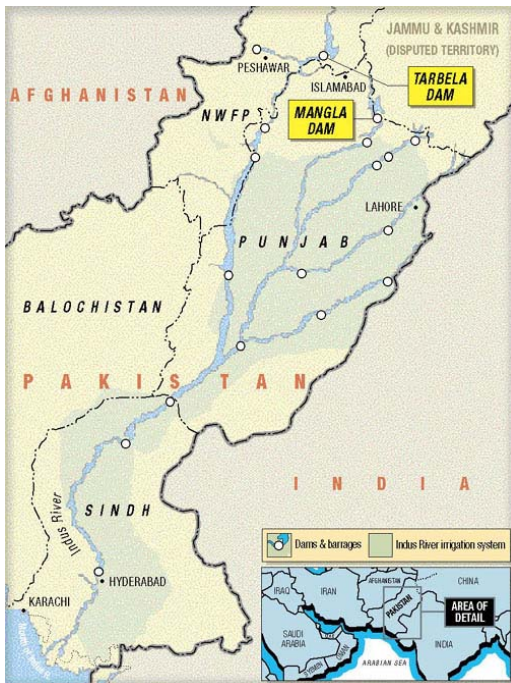
Language Rights

Sindhi is an ancient language with a rich literary tradition. In the 19th century, the British granted official

status to the Sindhi language, requiring that bureaucrats posted in Sindh learn the language. Pakistan denied any official status to the language after ‘dissolving’ the province of Sindh in 1954. When mass protests in the late 1960s resulted in the restoration of the province, the first elected Sindh Assembly reinstated Sindhi as the official language of the province. The Pakistani government has interfered with the implementation of the law. A majority of the officials and government workers appointed in Sindh do not speak the language. Pakistan refuses to allow the use of Sindhi in University entrance examinations or in job interviews for government employees in Sindh, and severely limits radio and television broadcasts in the language.

The Right to Livelihood

The once mighty Indus River has been the lifeblood of Sindh since time immemorial—in fact, much of the population still lives on the banks of the river. The river supplies water for agriculture and fisheries: its seasonal high flows fed Sindh’s forests and wetlands, and its flow to the sea watered the mangrove forests that protect the coast from flooding.



Pakistan has built several mega-dams and barrages upstream that have impeded the flow of the Indus River and its tributaries to Sindh. As a consequence, the floodplains that fed Sindh’s forests are gone, resulting in massive deforestation: less than 20% of the original 600,000 acres of forest land is now being regenerated. Numerous species of plants and animals are endangered, including native and migratory birds such as pelicans and flamingos

that rely on wetlands during their Spring migration to Sindh, and mammals such as the Indus River Dolphin, jackals, and boars.

Water no longer flows to the sea; as a consequence, the mangrove forests have experienced a 90% decline—from 2400 square kilometers to 200 square kilometers. Without protection from the mangrove forests, seawater has encroached—inundating 1.2 million acres of agricultural land and uprooting residents of 159 villages. The once plentiful seafood catch has been drastically reduced. The net result is that throughout Sindh, poverty levels, malnutrition and disease now match those in Sub-Saharan Africa.



Searching for water in the riverbed of the once mighty Indus (BBC photo).

Pakistan is proposing to build another mega-dam called the Kalabagh Dam and a canal called Thal—these projects would further block and divert huge amounts of water upstream. The Indus is one of the largest carriers of silt—replenishing Sindh’s agricultural soil in what is otherwise an arid desert. The amount of silt carried by the Indus has already been reduced from an average of about 1,000,000 tons a day before 1955 to 400,000 tons; the proposed Kalabagh Dam will further rob Sindh of half of this vital soil.



The Indus River Dolphin, or Bulan, found only in Sindh, is on the verge of extinction.

The Right to Development

Pakistan receives 67% of its revenue from Sindh. The sources of this revenue include royalties from coal, gas and oil deposits, the sea port, industry, and what remains of Sindh's fisheries and agriculture. However, Sindhi poverty rates are now twice the national average and poverty is increasing.

A majority of Sindhi girls and almost half of Sindhi boys do not receive even basic schooling and remain illiterate. Yet Pakistan continues to allocate a majority of its available budgetary resources to its military. Pakistan's 2003-04 federal budget allocated Rs 3.1 billion (about US \$52 million) for education while allocating Rs 161 billion (about US \$2.7 billion) for the military. The actual military expenditure is substantially higher—for example, the pensions of retired military personnel are not included in the military's budget. The 2004-05 provincial budget of Sindh, also dictated by the federal government, allocated Rs 2.6 billion (\$43 million) for education while allocating Rs 10.1 billion (\$168 million) for 'law and order.'



Primary school girls in Sindh village wear blindfolds as a protest against lack of secondary schools. A placard reads, "Educate Us Pakistan."

Sindhis do not support the militant policies of the government and their participation in the military is virtually nil. Sindhis would like to see education, health and development expenditures dramatically increased. Moreover, Sindhis would like to see a fair allocation of these resources to Sindhi-speaking areas.

The Right to Self-Determination

Sindhis' demands for their fundamental human rights have been met with harsh crackdowns. Student protesters were arrested in large numbers after indiscriminate shooting of peaceful demonstrators in March 1968. Sedition charges are a common tool against protestors. The Sindhi national poet, Shaikh Ayaz (d. 1999) was charged with treason—a crime punishable by death—for advocating peace with India.



Abdul Haq Mirani (1975-2000)

In the 1980s, hundreds of Sindhis campaigning for democracy were massacred by the military. Oppressive methods are still in use—Abdul Haq Mirani, a peaceful protestor, is among those killed by the Pakistani police in recent years.

On February 20, 2004, approximately 1800 people were reportedly charged with sedition for singing the Sindhi national anthem during peaceful protests. Moreover, human rights activists are often held without charge and prisoners are routinely tortured by the police and security forces.

Sindhis are suffering from a military dictatorship bent on using their resources to promote a militant Islamist agenda—for example, by developing nuclear weapons and exporting them to other Muslim countries, and by facilitating the training of terrorists in madrasahs. The repressive nature of the Pakistani regime, and its powerful ethnic base in a fanatic fundamentalist population, make it nearly impossible for Sindhis to engage in a civic dialog within Pakistan.



Pakistani police clubbing peaceful demonstrators (The Daily Ibrat)

The Sindhis have an inalienable right to self-determination. The diabolical nature of the military force they face can be seen by the fact that Pakistani army stands accused of massacring two million and raping hundreds of thousands of Bangladeshis, and was the prime supporter of the fanatic Taliban in Afghanistan. It is imperative that the world speaks out for human rights of Sindhis—a peaceful culture should not be forced to perish in the face of aggression.

How You Can Help

Please consider actively supporting the human rights of Sindhis. Two active organizations which focus on their plight are:

- *The World Sindhi Congress*: Founded by a veteran Sindhi leader, the late G.M. Syed, the WSC works to promote the right of self-determination for Sindhis.
<http://www.worldsindhicongress.org>
- *The World Sindhi Institute*: Based in Washington, D.C., the WSI is particularly effective in informing the U.S. government officials.
<http://www.worldsindhi.org>

For more information and updates about Sindhi culture and society, you may join a mailing list; click on mailing list at the website below and follow the directions:
<http://freesindh.org>

Consider informing your elected representatives directly about your concerns. Elected representatives are generally very responsive to their constituents and eager to learn more. Such efforts, meager as they are, have already yielded some results: this year eleven members of the U.S. House of Representatives wrote a letter to Pakistan in support the rights of Sindhis. These Congressional Representatives also asked the Voice of America to initiate broadcasts in Sindhi—such broadcasts would encourage Sindhis who support democracy and secularism.

Moreover, the US Congressional Human Rights Caucus held hearings highlighting the Sindh situation for the first time. Congressman Tom Tancredo of Colorado, who chaired the hearing, observed:

“The treatment received by the Sindh province in Pakistan is also of concern. Sindhis are peace loving, nonviolent Sufis, supportive of the American values of democracy and secularism, and opposed to terrorism and nuclear arms. However, they continue to be marginalized by the Pakistan Government, and are negatively affected by the Pakistani Government's efforts to dam the Indus River.”

*Congressman
Tom Tancredo*



- United States citizens can go to the websites below to find out how to write to your Congressional Representative or your Senator:
<http://www.house.gov/writerep/>
http://www.senate.gov/general/contact_information/senators_cfm.cfm
- In the European Union, contact Members of European Parliament. <http://www.europarl.eu.int/>
- In the United Kingdom, contact your MPs, and members of the Foreign Relations Committee.
<http://www.parliament.uk/>

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In April 2004, Dr. Agha attended the 60th Session of the U.N. Human Rights Commission as a delegate of Interfaith International. This article incorporates the gist of his presentation during the UNHRC session in Geneva, given in cooperation with the World Sindhi Congress.