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## **A PERSPECTIVE FROM UNIVERSITY TEACHERS AND STUDENTS ON RELIGIOUS INTOLERANT BEHAVIOR**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Religious intolerance arises when individuals or groups refuse to accept and respect the religious beliefs, practices, or convictions of others. It involves denying the right of another person or religious group to express their faith freely. This research article aimed to elicit university teachers' and students' thoughts on increased intolerance and polarisation in and out of learning centers. The research study comprised university teachers and students from four universities in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. This research used a case study design because it was qualitative. Four teachers and four students from each university were interviewed using deliberate sampling to collect data. Data was gathered by using a self-developed interview protocol. Thematic analysis, comprising questions about religious dialogue, religious conflict resolution, and the causes of religious intolerance, came after the data analysis. Teachers placed a strong emphasis on critical thinking. They felt avoiding religious conflicts is preferable if one lacks background knowledge when responding to questions about religious discussions with peers. However, university students believed we could promote religious tolerance by accepting others' beliefs and having an open forum.

**Key Words:** Intolerance, Religious Intolerance, Case Study, University Teachers, University Students

## INTRODUCTION

Our world is full of more and more variety. Different groups of people have very different beliefs, customs, and ideas. This can sometimes be challenging, especially when these differences clash with our way of living. People tend to believe that their own beliefs and customs are the best. Because of this, it can be hard to accept that other ways of life might also be valid. There is only sometimes one correct answer to everything. People have different ideas about what is true, accurate, beautiful, and so on( Joppke, 2004). Keeping a society with various types of people requires everyone to let others live how they want. This means being tolerant, even if we do not agree with or like their beliefs and ways of living because they differ from ours. (Cohen, 2004; King, 2012).

Intolerance is a form of conduct characterized by an individual's unwillingness to acknowledge and appreciate beliefs, ideas, and thoughts that differ from theirs. Hate crimes and discriminatory acts are encompassed within the ambit of intolerance. It is a global phenomenon that is on the rise. Instances of intolerance are reported daily, targeting individuals with divergent viewpoints, those belonging to different religious and ethnic groups, and those who hold varying ideological perspectives. Intolerance is also directed toward minorities, refugees, and immigrants, among others (Eisenstein, 2006).

Qur'ān says, in 17:70, every person's human dignity must be respected, regardless of their creed, colour, ethnic origin, gender, or social status. Tolerance is the most important attribute that has enabled humanity to coexist peacefully with other people and non-humans on Earth. It made people adaptable enough to value diversity and welcome all kinds of inventions. This introduced the concept of freedom of speech and expression of opposed ideas, which not only expanded human knowledge and options but also provided a deeper understanding of the opinions and beliefs of others. Nevertheless, severe intolerance rules in society's individual and collective life, where little misunderstandings cause relationships to break down and lead to murder and genocide. Negative instances can be diminished if not eliminated; people learn to respect one another's viewpoints.

Educational institutions, including schools, colleges, and universities, are expected to be neutral and unbiased environments where learning and knowledge exchange occur. Ideally, they should be free from any form of intolerance, such as discrimination based on race, religion, gender, or other factors. In other words, these institutions should be open,

inclusive, and respectful spaces, allowing students and educators to engage with diverse perspectives without fear of prejudice or bias. Educational institutions are meant to be safe and fair places to learn and grow. However, sometimes, they are affected by intolerance, which can lead to harmful behaviours and attitudes spreading among students. Educators encourage students to apply critical thinking skills by bridging theoretical knowledge with practical, real-world scenarios(Justice et al., 2008).

According to Pfefferbaum et. al 2000 intolerance among the youth Pakistani youths have experienced both direct and indirect impacts of intolerance. These impacts manifest in several ways:

1. Proximal Contact: There is a portion of the youth who had witnessed it, probably in a city through indulging in terrorist activity or maybe have had family members who became victims of the incident.

2. Constant Exposure: Saika's case demonstrates that the climate of threat and insecurity currently dominates society and negatively impacts the psychological health of youths. They remain anxious for their safety and that of their close ones and other people they know.

3. Media-Based Exposure: Interacting with other people who have the same views and believe in violent extremism also poses a significant risk, especially when one is exposed to violent extremist media channels. These numerous parameters of contact significantly increase the risk of psychopathology, depression, anxiety, mood disorders, and, very considerably, post-traumatic stress disorder, PTSD.

According to Saleem (2021), extreme division or polarisation has split our society into groups that distrust each other. This focus on "us versus them" makes it harder for people to come together and weakens the bonds that hold us together as a society. It is increasingly common for people's political views to define who they are as a person. Public discourse in Pakistan has become increasingly hateful and filled with personal attacks. This attitude, combined with the dangerous mix of politics and religion, has created a climate of fear and anxiety among those who believe in national unity. Pakistan was founded as a haven for Muslims in the subcontinent, a place where they could practice their faith freely. However, the recent trends of baseless accusations, unfair punishments, and disregard for due process threaten the very foundation of this vision – a Pakistan that guarantees equal rights for all its citizens, regardless of religion. (Niazi, 2012). In even the most well-established democracies,

there are documented instances of intolerance, especially during periods of crisis or threat (Merolla & Zechmeister, 2009).

Pakistani society is undergoing a significant transformation, marked by changes in cultural norms, values, and social dynamics. This shift is accompanied by a rise in negative behaviours, including jealousy, vengeance, racism, social inequality, and frustration, which are manifesting in various public spaces. Violent, aggressive, and intolerant behaviours have become increasingly common in streets, roads, markets, offices, and other communal areas, making intolerance a frequent and troubling everyday experience (Mushtaq. M, Kiyani, M.M., 2013).

The rise in aggressive behaviour among young people, like street fights and arguments in public places, highlights a growing intolerance within society. This situation raises important questions about what is causing this trend, what factors are linked, and its potential consequences. The above behaviours by youth show increased intolerance and raise many questions about their causes, correlates, and consequences (Majeed & Hashmi, 2014; Winthrop & Graff, 2010).

Religious intolerance is prevalent today, rooted in the belief that one religion is superior while dismissing or distorting all others as false or invalid (Nussbaum, 2004). Different studies on tolerance and the "religion variables" encompass factors such as religious affiliation, diverse measures of religious conduct, including attending religious services, and various aspects of religious beliefs. Several studies examine clear distinctions among religious denominations and concurrently distinguish between a general secular and religious orientation. These studies reveal robust associations between religiosity and intolerance, with minor variations observed among significant religious customs. Regular attendees of religious services have exhibited lower levels of tolerance compared to those who do not attend, irrespective of their ideological orientation. Overall, religious commitment has also been linked to an aversion to values that advocate open-mindedness and self-determination (Saroglou et al., 2004).

To eradicate all forms of intolerance and discrimination based on religion or belief, the United Nations General Assembly passed a declaration in 1981 (United Nations, 1981). In the United States, thousands of hate crimes are committed annually, targeting individuals based on their race, religion, disability, and ethnicity (Hodge & Wolfer, 2008). Recently, recurring prejudice and bias have become so commonplace that they are seen as a regrettable human predicament (Khan, 2011). Various research

inquiries suggest that people often harbour biases towards individuals of a different gender, religion, race, or ethnicity (Prutzman & Johnson, 1997; Chang, 2002; Hurtado, 2001; Enberg, 2004; Henderson-King & Kaleta, 2000; Christie & Dawes, 2001).

Several incidents have highlighted violent tendencies within Pakistan's higher education institutions, as well as violent extremism beyond educational settings and boundaries. There is a disturbing trend of violent mob behaviour and extremism in Pakistan's higher education institutions. One notable instance is the untimely death of university student Mashal Khan from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2017. An irate crowd accused Khan of disseminating blasphemous content on social media. Several non-academic staff members also incited the students into the crowd (Ahmed, 2019)

Mashal Khan, a 23-year-old student at Abdul Wali Khan University in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, was one among several victims of mob vigilantism. On April 13, 2017, Khan was subjected to a violent attack by a group of university students and political activists. The attack occurred following allegations that he had shared blasphemous content on Facebook. This horrifying incident was captured on video, ostensibly to dissuade others from committing blasphemy.

Subsequently, investigators determined that the allegations against Khan lacked credibility. In February 2018, an antiterrorism court handed down a death sentence to one of the assailants, while five others received multiple life imprisonment terms, and 25 individuals were sentenced to three years in prison. However, 26 defendants were acquitted due to insufficient evidence. Khan's family planned to appeal the verdict. The fact that Khan's murder was widely condemned and that the Herald magazine named this perceptive journalism student Pakistan's Person of the Year is encouraging.

However, it is disconcerting that Khan's critics have marked the acquittals with celebratory videos shared on social media, continuing to label him as a blasphemer and referring to his killers as "ghazis" (an honorific reserved for Muslims engaged in jihad against non-Muslims).

The Mashal Khan case exemplifies the clash between two visions of Pakistan—one advocated by vigilante groups mobilizing and participating in elections and the other by a notably more liberal civil society. Within Pakistani society, no research on social issues can be considered complete without acknowledging the profound influence of religion. Religion is often regarded as the foundational cornerstone of Pakistan.

Research conducted by the Pew Research Center reveals that not only Pakistan but also all Muslim nations in Sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia, South Asia, Afghanistan, and Pakistan hold religion in high regard. However, when it comes to sectarian intolerance, Pakistan exhibits higher levels compared to other countries in the region. According to the research, only 53% of Pakistanis consider Shias to be Muslims, while 37% do not categorize them as Muslims. This contrasts with both Bangladesh and Afghanistan, where 84% and 77%, respectively, recognize Shias as Muslims. Additionally, the same research found that the youth of Pakistan displayed the most intolerant attitudes towards Shias compared to their counterparts in other countries

In the recent past, different studies have been conducted on religious tolerance requires an understanding of what is true or right. Without this understanding, we are unable to evaluate the actions of others, and it shapes our own beliefs and behaviours. Tolerance arises from dealing with disagreements on fundamental human matters. Tolerance is the virtue that helps one overcome dogmatism, haughtiness, and intolerance when confronted with ideas or practices that are different from one's own (Clark 1997). In Knauth's (2014) view, there needs to be a situation in which there is difference or plurality and a valid reason, whether conscious or unconscious, to accept even value this situation of difference.

## **OBJECTIVES**

The objectives of the study were:

1. To explore the views of university teachers of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa about religious intolerance.
2. To explore the views of university students of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa about religious intolerance.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The main research questions were.

RQ1. What views do university teachers have about the different elements that lead to religious intolerance, and how do they handle and deal with religious differences?

RQ2. What do university students think about the different factors that contribute to religious intolerance, and how do they deal with and handle religious differences?

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

This study adopted a qualitative research methodology and used a case study design. The researcher gathered the data from participants through interviews.

### **Participants**

This study included all students and teachers of public and private sector universities in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa for interview. The total participants comprised all the students studying in both the private and public sector universities of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

### **Procedure**

According to Creswell (2002), a case study requires 3-5 participants, while a subgroup sampling study requires >33 participants (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007).

The sample was comprised of teachers and students from four public universities. Purposeful sampling was used to collect data from 12 teachers and 12 students, four from each university.

This research design adopted a purposeful sampling approach for the collection of data. 12 university teachers and students were interviewed.

### **Data Collection**

The interview questions were self-developed based on factors from existing literature. The interview protocol underwent validation by seeking the expert opinions of other university teachers. After validation, **the** researcher collected data personally through face-to-face interviews and discussions. During the interviews, the researcher asked leading and follow-up questions.

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

The researcher followed thematic analysis for the data analysis process, which included storing and transcribing the data and coding it. The data is further organized into themes serving as pivotal discoveries in the study. The researcher used these themes to

present the findings through figures and an in-depth discussion. These visual and narrative representations contributed to a comprehensive interpretation of the findings, leading to a broader discussion of general conclusions that were subsequently compared with existing literature.

## **Results and Discussion**

The study aimed to investigate the perspectives of university teachers and students in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa regarding intolerance and religious intolerance in our society. It involved analysing discussions, interviews, experiences, observations, and viewpoints from stakeholders, including university teachers and students. Notably, the participants were highly engaged in the debate, actively contributing their viewpoints, and probing questions were occasionally asked for more insightful results. The researcher analyzed the data collected through thematic analysis. Religious intolerance was the first theme that emerged from the interview phase.

The study offered its contributions from different angles to existing researchers. First, while considering the various elements contributing to religious intolerance and addressing and managing religious differences, the results revealed that teachers and students had a comprehensive, transparent, and open perspective. They didn't differ from each other and had a consensus over interfaith harmony.

Secondly, teachers and students believe that different reasons and factors are responsible for religious intolerance, which is affecting people's behaviour today. They are becoming more intolerant towards others. Recent media reports on cases highlight social trends we urgently need to take seriously and pay attention to. Such serious deeds, actions, and precautions are necessary to prevent similar losses in the future.

While answering the questions about the different elements contributing to religious intolerance, the teachers responded that critical knowledge gaps, media influence(digital, print, social), narrative framing, social norms, and patriarchy play the primary role.

Most teachers said they discouraged and avoided having religious conversations with peers and students inside and outside the classroom, even when the topic is simple and well-known, out of fear of being manipulated.

It was interesting that both teachers and students agreed to accept diversity and differences of opinion. They considered the media and propaganda responsible for increasing intolerance in today's world.

During the off-the-record discussion, teachers had the point that due



Most of the respondents were adamant that religion is private and should not be discussed. They believed that since respecting different creeds, sects, and beliefs is essential to fostering tolerance and understanding, we should emphasize this to promote the religious harmony that is so crucial in today's world.

While university students expressed their views about intolerance, especially religious intolerance, where such sad incidents happened in the past, they commented that they better avoid such topics, which can lead to conflicts, as they strongly believe that religion is very personal and private. They believed in individual differences and accepted diversity with the option that people would be less tolerant towards others due to historical differences and the patriarchal system to which they belonged; society is reluctant to accept diversity.

One factor that the students identified as contributing to the rise in religious intolerance is illiteracy. They suggested that critical thinking, moderation, and peer education can keep us in positive relationships with people who have different beliefs and opinions from us.

One of the participants commented that one should not form opinions without proper background knowledge, facts, and verification. The students said that youth should not be indulged in religious debate. If conflicts escalate, one should seek assistance from relevant authorities or organizations.

Here is the comparative description of different studies conducted in past with the topic, Tolerance and Intolerance.

Kaukab, 2014 conducted a study linked to intolerance among university students. Interestingly, the following themes generated from the study matched the current research.

- ⇒ Certain religious interpretations contribute to intolerance.
- ⇒ Societal biases and class divisions are also factors in intolerance.
- ⇒ Intolerance stems from a lack of parental and familial care.
- ⇒ Injustice and ineffective law enforcement can fuel intolerance.
- ⇒ Inadequate teacher training can lead to intolerance.
- ⇒ A deficiency in civic and moral education fosters intolerance

In the current study, the teachers and student participants agreed that misinterpretations cause intolerance, especially religious intolerance. They were vocal about the patriarchy and the role of media in religious intolerance.

There is one more study about religious intolerance was carried out by Ntho-Ntho, 2016. The study utilized a phenomenological research design and concluded that despite the laws and policies governing their actions, school principals faced challenges aligning constitutional requirements with their traditions and school rules during policy implementation. The current study, "A Perspective from University Teachers and Students on Religious Intolerant Behavior," concluded that university teachers face challenges in dealing with differences. It said different factors are behind religious intolerance, such as critical knowledge gaps, religious extremism, contradictory opinions, and social norms.

Another study was which was related to intolerance and pedagogy by Shaukat, 2017. This study investigated the teaching methods employed by university teachers in the classroom. It mainly centred on pedagogical practices. In comparison, the current research differed and focused on intolerant behaviour, its elements, and dealing with religious discussions and conflicts within and outside the classrooms by university teachers and students.

Another study on the topic of intolerance among youth and its impact on society was done by Abro, 2017. Karachi was the focus of this study. The results of the study were:

- Intolerance among young people in our society is complex and can manifest in various ways depending on the situation.
- Social media is a kind of entertainment that is easily accessible to the youth, and its negative aspects can also be easily targeted.
- The study used Push and pull factors, a term for the drivers contributing to religious intolerance, such as unemployment, religious extremism, ethnicity, and political relationships. These are significant drivers of rising intolerance among youth in urban areas, acting as push factors.
- Youth intolerance is on the rise in Sindh's urban areas and across Pakistan due to the pull factors of print, electronic, and social media.

The typical findings are listed below:

- ⇒ Intolerance is a multifaceted and complex phenomenon.
- ⇒ Media in all its forms—print, digital, and social—is responsible for increasing intolerance.
- ⇒ While the current study concluded that economic discrimination, media influence, knowledge deficiency, social norms, patriarchy, misinformation, and resistance to diversity are the factors that add fuel to religious intolerance.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

In the light of discussion, the following conclusions are drawn:

1. Intolerance is a multifaceted and evolving issue, manifesting in various forms.
2. Religious intolerance is one of the facets of intolerance, which is a complex phenomenon.
3. In a diverse society, religion is a personal affair and should be considered separate to ensure everyone's beliefs are respected.
4. The various significant elements that were pointed out by the respondents for religious intolerance are lack of knowledge and misinterpreted versions of religious directives, ethnocentrism and sectarianism, lack of understanding and political gain.
5. Religious intolerance is also negatively influenced by patriarchy, media portrayal, social norms and values, and a rejection of diversity.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the discussion and conclusions, the following recommendations have been made to decrease religious intolerance:

1. Revision of the curriculum is necessary to decrease the level of intolerance. Some serious and practical steps should be taken to revise the existing curriculum according to the needs of the time.
2. New subjects and topics must be introduced that encourage critical thinking through reading and can significantly reduce religious intolerance by fostering a deeper understanding of diverse beliefs and practices.
3. From a primary level, through planned activities, events and morning assemblies, it must be emphasized and inculcated that religion is a personal matter that helps individuals appreciate the unique spiritual journeys of others, promoting a sense of respect and empathy.
4. Different opportunities, platforms and challenging events should be planned and designed to channel the energies of the youth within and outside the institutions, so they engage in constructive activities and utilize their energies in positive ways.

5. Facilitating open discussions on religious tolerance in educational institutions, from primary school to university level, must be made compulsory.

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