Religious freedoms: South Asian perspective

South Asia has many vibrant colours and shades of ethnic, religious, linguistic and cultural diversity. Unfortunately, this vibrancy and diversity is suppressed by historically chronic minority right violations and abuses. Minorities in secular India face every day conflict and violence in Gujrat; in countries like Bangladesh and Malaysia, minorities tackle political oppression in the guise of national identity; while in Pakistan, non-Muslims face “varying degrees of discrimination and exclusion and on occasion threat to life, property, dignity and freedom by organised majoritarian groups with an agenda of exclusion based on hate with complicity of the state” (Salim 2006, p.3). While religious minorities in South Asia battle on complex fronts, they also have common challenges such as “limited access to education and employment opportunities, which leads to the perpetuation of poverty…. intimidation and violence on the part of the state or non-state actors” (MRGI 2005), as well as issues including political representation, misuse of laws, forced assimilations, and forced marriages. There are vulnerable communities such as Ahmadis, Shias, Hazaras, Zikris, Daudi Bohras and Ismailis.

South Asian states have ratified key UN human rights treaties that protect minority rights. But at the same time, states also have internal security laws such as Uniform Civil Code and Prevention of Terrorism Act (India); and religious acts like the blasphemy laws in Pakistan which are often misused/abused to terrorise and oppress minorities. In Pakistan especially, UN declarations and conventions are neither widely known or understood, nor has the country fulfilled its commitments as a member state of the UN by its failure to create appropriate laws to protect religious minorities.

The proposed panel will highlight key issues of concern in South Asian states with regard to religious freedoms. Moreover, it is hoped that it will lead to better understanding of and between religious communities in an effort towards peaceful existence within the region as a whole. The panel will help pool and analyse ideas for the development of appropriate strategies for the protection of minority rights.

References:


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