

While caste is the seminal feature of Indian society, it is actively denied in Pakistan. Social activist Shahbano Aliani argues, “When questioned, however, if caste is a problem, most Pakistanis will disagree [...] they will insist that the caste-system is not Islamic and since the majority of us are Muslims, therefore, there is no caste problem in Pakistan.”<sup>1</sup> However, caste is an issue in Pakistan particularly for ‘Chuhra (Dalit) Christians.’ In nineteenth century India, the ‘Chuhras’ were the largest untouchable caste in the Punjab and engaged in scavenging and sanitation work for survival. In 1870, the Chuhra caste initiated a ‘mass movement’ which peaked in the 1930s when almost the entire Chuhra caste converted to Protestant Christianity.<sup>2</sup> In 1947, during Partition, these ‘Chuhra Christians’ emerged as the nascent Protestant Church in Pakistan. In 1971, sociologist Pieter Streefland conducted a study of Chuhra Christians in Karachi.<sup>3</sup> Streefland found that the majority still work in the sanitation industry and are often shunned because of their association with ‘polluting’ occupations.<sup>4</sup>

When Streefland published his study, middle-class Christians heavily criticized his book. They accused him of insensitivity and for conflating the word ‘Christian’ with ‘Chuhra’ or ‘sweeper.’ In an issue of *Al-Mushir*, Georg Pfeffer argued that Streefland was criticized precisely because he illuminated the ‘caste issue’ in Pakistan and underscored the Dalit origins of the Protestant Church.<sup>5</sup> For many Pakistani Christians; Dalit ancestry is a sensitive subject. Asif Aqeel, Director of the Center for Law and Justice in Lahore writes, “[In Pakistan] the word “Christian” is synonymous with lowest-caste ‘untouchable.’”<sup>6</sup> Surinder Jodhka and Ghanshyam Shah argue, “Almost the entire Christian population of Pakistan are converts from Dalit communities and many of them continue to be treated so even today.”<sup>7</sup> Physical assault, persecution, and social degradation are components of caste discrimination that are common in Pakistan. For many Chuhra Christians, these experiences are punctuated by commensal segregation which serves to further illustrate their distinction and ‘pollution’ from the dominant communities.

Caste scholars frequently address the fissures of caste among Dalit converts. John Webster, Rowena Robinson, and Sathianathan Clarke argue that caste persecution and “graded inequality” are the seminal features of caste dynamics between Dalit and ‘high caste’ converts to Christianity.<sup>8</sup> James Massey asserts that for Punjabi Christians, Chuhra ancestry is a powerful identity marker. Massey argues that even today, “Punjabi Christians ignore or are afraid to talk about the past, which would reveal their low social background.”<sup>9</sup> Despite the growing field of Dalit studies, few scholars analyze caste among Christians in Pakistan. How ‘caste consciousness’ is negotiated within the Islamic context and between various Christian denominations is an integral component for understanding Christian ritual, practice, and theology in Pakistan. This study will remedy this gap in the literature by examining the impact of ‘caste consciousness’ and caste identities among Pakistani Protestant Christians.

Through the AIPS Summer Research Grant, I propose to conduct in-depth interviews with Christian leaders in the Church of Pakistan (COP) in Lahore for two months. I will investigate the role of ‘caste’ among Protestant Christians in Punjab. During my doctoral research, I cultivated close relationships with COP leaders and many ‘Chuhra’ pastors in urban slums in Sindh. During this research trip, I will expand my knowledge about caste dynamics among Christians in Punjab. The variances of Protestant ritual, practice, and theology particularly between middle-class and ‘Chuhra’ churches will provide a nuanced view of how urbanization and migration affects caste identity in two provinces with a large Christian presence. I expect this research to contribute substantively to my book which focuses on Dalit Christians in Pakistan and will play a significant role in the analysis of caste in South Asia.

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<sup>1</sup> Shahbano Aliani, "Caste in Pakistan: The Elephant in the Room,"

<https://reddiarypk.wordpress.com/2009/08/25/caste-in-pakistan/>

<sup>2</sup> John C. B. Webster, *The Dalit Christians: A History* (Delhi: ISPCK Press, 1992), 39; Frederick and Margaret Stock, *People Movements in the Punjab, with Special Reference to the United Presbyterian Church* (South Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1975), 65.

<sup>3</sup> Pieter Streefland, *The Sweepers of Slaughterhouse: Conflict and Survival in a Karachi Neighbourhood* (Van Gorcum, 1979), 30.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Georg Pfeffer, "Some Comments on a Publication of Dr. P. H. Streefland and Some Additional Remarks," *Al-Mushir* (Rawalpindi) 16 (1974) 299-304.

<sup>6</sup> Asif Aqueel, "Oppressive Powers in Pakistan Threaten Christian Lives,"

<http://morningstarnews.org/2012/12/oppressive-powers-in-pakistan-threaten-christian-lives/>

<sup>7</sup> Surinder S. Jodhka and Ghanshyam Shah, "Comparative Contexts of Discrimination: Caste and Untouchability in South Asia," *Indian Institute of Dalit Studies*, Vol. IV, No. 05, (2010), 6.

<sup>8</sup> See John C. B. Webster, "Who is a Dalit" in *Untouchable: Dalits in Modern India*, S. M. Michael, ed., (Sage Publications, 1999), 13; Rowena Robinson, *Christians of India* (New York: Sage Publications, 2003), 80;

Sathianathan Clarke, "Hindutva, Religious, and Ethnocultural Minorities and Indian-Christian Theology," *Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 95 (2002), No. 2, 210-211.

<sup>9</sup> James Massey, *Dalit Theology: History, Contest, Text, and Whole Salvation* (Delhi: Manohar Press, 2014), 101 and 86-87.