

# Hearings on Religious Freedom in India and Pakistan: Rev. James Channan Oral Testimony

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REV.

CHANNAN: Mr. Chairman, our honorable commissioners of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, I am very grateful to you for inviting me here and also very grateful that you have taken our country as a case and also you arranged this hearing.

The father of the nation, Mr. Muhammad Ali Jana [ph], dreamed of Pakistan as a democratic state where all people will have equal rights and obligations; religion will have nothing to do with the policies of the state. In a speech to the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan on August 11, 1947, he said: "You are free to go to your temples; you are free to go to your mosques. You may belong to any religion or caste or creed. That has nothing to do with the business of the state. We are all citizens and equal citizens of one state."

After the death of Mr. Jana in 1948, all religious minorities have been looked down upon; discriminated against; reduced to second-class status and persecuted politically, religiously, socially and economically. The minorities feel aliens in their own homeland, threatened by any promulgation of Islamic laws. The way Islamic law is interpreted and put into practice pushes minorities against the wall.

Muslim fanatics make minorities feel as if the country was formed by and for the Muslims alone, which is historically incorrect and unfair. I am skipping my paper because of the restraint of the time, and also, many points are taken care of by my friend, Mr. M.L. Shahani.

Politically, Christians and all other religious minorities are segregated from the mainstream through the unjust system of separate electorates, where a Muslim can vote only for a Muslim and a non-Muslim only for a non-Muslim. This is religion apartheid. Christians are deprived economically and belong to the poorest class. Not a single Christian owns, for example, a mill or a factory or any other big business in Pakistan.

They are discriminated against religiously and subjugated socially. In almost every predominantly Muslim village, Christians are allotted plots in one corner of the village close to the filth depot and a dirty pool of water. This colony would be the filthiest dwelling place of the village or the cities. There is not a single Christian village or a colony in the whole country where we can find all basic facilities of life, such as clean drinking water, gas, concrete roads, sewer system, telephones, pool, hospital and playground, et cetera.

Most of the Christians living in villages are virtual slaves of Muslim landlords. The monthly income of a person who is a servant of a Muslim landlord is not more than 1,200 rupees. That's about US\$22 a month. This also includes the labor of the family members, who can be called at any time to clean house or graze animals. Moreover, this salary is not given regularly but, in most of the cases, given at the end of the year.

There are cases where Christian women and young girls working in the homes of Muslims have been raped and no action taken against the culprits. The religion freedom of minorities is at stake in my country. There, we are proclaimed as a sacred trust. This gives the impression that Christians do not belong to this country, and we are outsiders; therefore, we are a sacred trust.

But a question: to whom this sacred trust will be returned? There is a famous slogan which is raised all over the country that Pakistan [in foreign language] Mohammed [in foreign language], which is translated as what is the meaning of Islam? There is no god but God, and Muhammad is Allah's prophet.

We as Christians can make--religiously speaking, we can make videos, audiocassettes and films, play dramas and publish religious material, but if any Muslim considers anything against Islam, then not only one Christian but the whole Christian community could be victimized in retaliation. This is what happened to a Christian village near Bhal Shantinigar [ph] on 6 of February 1997, where a Muslim made an announcement in a mosque that a Christian had desecrated a copy of the Holy Koran.

This announcement was absolutely false, but it resulted in burning the whole village of Shantinagar into ashes. I visited this place personally three days after the incident. This village looked war-stricken, as most of the houses, churches and shops were blown away with hand grenades and bombs. Other neighboring villages were not scared either. Over 14 churches were destroyed in several villages, including a big church in Hanival [ph]. Hundreds of Bibles, hymn books,

holy pictures were burned to ashes.

This act of vandalism resulted in making 20,000 Christians homeless. Not a single person has been given punishment or sentenced to jail for such vandalism by a mob of angry, frantic Muslims. The inquiry report of the Judicial Commission made in 1997, headed by Justice Thanvidan Mutha [ph], judge of the Lahore high court, has never been made public to date.

There are some concrete examples where I would like to show that how we are persecuted in Pakistan. Take the example of conversions to Islam. There is one famous hospital in Lahore. It is called the Quanaah [ph] Memorial Hospital, and it was built by the famous kicker star Imran Han [ph], and he collected donations from all over the world, and interestingly, most of the donations were collected from Christians, from the West, from America, Australia and elsewhere.

But it's interesting to know that in this cancer hospital, Christians are openly invited to embrace Islam. I have a case of Mr. Perezuisi [ph], who lives one block away from my house. He was diagnosed with cancer, and his wife took him to this hospital, and they were asked to deposit 600 U.S. dollars, about 30,000 rupees, and it shocked the whole family, because they were earning about \$60 a month.

So, the doctors told this lady you go to the receptionist and give the money which is needed for the treatment. And when this woman went here, a nurse who was in charge of this registration, she asked what--she said to them, the Christians, why do you and your husband embrace Islam? By doing so, there would be free treatment for your husband.

This was the most terrible shock she got in her life. She said listen, Madam: we are Christians. I believe that Jesus Christ is our savior, and he suffered for our sins and gave his life for us. We will never compromise about this treatment. Do you think I am going to sell my Jesus for the treatment of my husband? It will never happen. My husband may die if it is God's will, but my husband and me will never change our religion.

This woman came to me for prayers and pastoral counseling, and I saw tears in her eyes when she was relating this incident. She did not convert because she had a very strong faith. One can only imagine how many other poor Christians are made such offers when they are in a desperate need of finances for treatment. This case of the cancer patient is a great example to this effect.

And conversion to Christianity: very briefly, I'd like to say that there is one village near Ocara [ph], and there, the church has built a school and college. At one day, one girl named Sultana--

CHAIRMAN ABRAMS: That's got to do with the floor of the Senate. Disregard it; but please continue.

REV. CHANNAN: Oh; so, this is a Christian village, and one Muslim girl named Sultana, she came to the priest, and she said I want to be converted to Christianity. And the priest said no, you cannot do so; you are only 15 years old, and I cannot baptize you. You will read something more about Christianity, and when you are an adult, you may ask for baptism, but I am not going to do anything right now, and I cannot baptize you.

But this thing somehow came to be known to the other Muslims and neighboring villages, and they made an announcement in the mosque and issued a fatwah. A fatwah is a religious decree. And they said we will go and burn this whole village into ashes. But fortunately, when they were about to burn this village, tract number six near Ocala [ph], the administration came to know, and they saved, they rescued the priest and people who were there, and this thing did not happen. And the Muslims and Christians there somehow came together, and they said let's see what the problem is.

And I want to say that how difficult it can be if only a Muslim even expresses a desire to become a Christian. So not only he but whole village can be in trouble.

There is also the system of the separate electorate which has already been elaborated, and we condemn this system on the basis of religion when there is a division among people of different faiths politically. We should be all citizens and equal citizens of the country, and there should not be any discrimination when elections are taking place.

And there are several examples of desecration of churches and graveyards, and I cannot go into detail on those, but I would like to mention that Muslims are allowed to teach catechism, but Christians are not. Very briefly, I would like to say that we are for a fair dialogue, and we would like to promote interfaith harmony and peace in the country and through mutual respect and understanding.

I would like to make a couple of recommendations. First of all, I would like to say that I invite you to come to Pakistan and see the situation that we are living in. I would like to make some recommendations to--for the betterment of religious minorities in Pakistan through the United Nations organization. The first thing is that the Government of Pakistan repeal all discriminatory laws, including the blasphemy laws, Section 295(b) and 295(c) of the Pakistan Penal Code; that the Government of Pakistan effectively implement the provisions of fundamental rights contained in the Constitution of Pakistan; and we would also like that democracy is restored in Pakistan; that the Government abolish the system of separate electorates; that the Government of Pakistan take stern action against fundamentalist organizations in the country which promote sectarian and religious intolerance; that the Government of Pakistan be prevailed upon by the international community to improve the status of human rights and its policies towards various religious minorities; that the government make policies towards a more modern, liberal and secular Pakistan as deemed by Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the father of the nation.

All those articles in the constitution must be repealed. These create a sense of alienation and discrimination towards religious minorities. And finally, at least one factfinding delegation of some human rights organization must visit Pakistan every year to observe the miseries of various religious minorities in Pakistan and publish its report.

Thank you very much.