

## **Inter-Faith Dialogue in Pakistan: An Analysis of Historical Tradition and Contemporary Challenges**

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### **1. Introduction, Significance and Background of the Research Topic**

The idea of inter-faith dialogue has attained a great importance in the backdrop of political, religious, social and economic circumstances of Pakistan. The international events which have happened in the last few years have compelled the religious heads to seek some new ways, tools and methods promoting inter-faith dialogue. The terrorist-attacks of September 11, 2001 in America and the latest terrorist activities in France, England, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan and Pakistan have shaken the whole world. In these circumstances, it is the need of the hour for the followers of all the religions to adopt the policy of fore-bearance, tolerance, patience and dialogue.<sup>(1)</sup> Pakistan is not only a multi-religious state but also neighbour to some very important countries like China, India, Iran, Afghanistan and Russia. In this particular socio-economic, religious and geographical scenario, it is the need of the hour to treat the followers of all religions equally. The mutual humanitarian socio-religious relations among the followers of all the faiths and religions must be strong without any discrimination of colour, caste and creed. Instead of highlighting religious differences, we should promote a culture of dialogue to bridge the gap among different religious sects, groups and communities. This is the only way through which we can establish peace, justice, equality and love for humanity. The true basis of mutually respectful relations among different nations is a proper and true dialogue. The nature, quality and quantity of this relationship depend upon the mutual dialogue.<sup>(2)</sup> The question of “dialogue” due to its ideological and psychological nature has remained very vital for the people of all the circles and especially for those who are related to the fields of education, research, thought and religion. They raise different questions like what is dialogue? Why should we adopt it? And what should be its nature, limitations and methodologies?

Dialogue is the means of transforming multi-faceted threats of terrorism, hatred and prejudice into a pleasant and peaceful socio-political

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environment. It is a constant and solid source of contact among different religions. A dialogue does not mean an invitation to make changes in any religion or a superficial unity among different religions.<sup>(3)</sup> During the dialogue, the element of separate identity and respect for other religions should prevail. The inter-faith relations are indeed a contact of minds and souls of the followers of different religions. Dialogue gives us the message of mutual respect, love, harmony and friendship. It teaches us how to tolerate others' point of view, how to respect them and how to bear all the fabrics of the society with total patience.<sup>(4)</sup> In Pakistan, the inter-faith dialogue will not only improve the religious matters of the people but also bring a social and economic revolution.<sup>(5)</sup> The role of all the institutions of any state is very important in the improvement and betterment of relations among the followers of different religions and for the success and succession of the dialogue. It is extremely necessary to highlight the significance of the inter-faith dialogue by universities, media, educational seminars, workshops and rallies in Pakistan. This research article is being presented due to the particular religious, political, social and ideological importance of inter-faith dialogue.

This research article has been organized in five parts, as follows; Part 1 comprises of the Introduction, significance and background of the research topic. Part 2 depicts historical tradition of inter-faith dialogue in Pakistan. Part 3 highlights six important contemporary challenges to inter-faith dialogue being faced by Pakistan. Ten recommendations have been mentioned in Part 4. A conclusion has been documented in the 5th and final part of the article.

## **2. Historical Tradition of Inter-Faith Dialogue in Pakistan**

Islam is the most important key to promote a harmonious culture of inter-faith coexistence in Pakistan. Since it is the religion of majority of the population in Pakistan, it is important to bring home to the people the importance of respecting the views of the other religions which Islam has taught us.<sup>(6)</sup> Islam forbids us to abuse anyone for having a particular faith, belief and religion, or to accuse anyone without any proof.<sup>(7)</sup> It has been commanded to settle the controversial and disputed issues with the help of best possible methods and skills based on mutual wisdom and welfare.<sup>(8)</sup> The Islamic teachings give us the message to behave well with the non-Muslims, and sense of total equality and justice should prevail all over. It does not allow anyone to misbehave or insult anyone because of the difference of faith, belief and religion.<sup>(9)</sup> The Prophet of Islam (PBUH) himself established, promoted and consolidated exemplary relations with the non-Muslims in the political, social and economic fields. The Madina Pact, the Hudaibiah Treaty, the Delegation of Najran and the Conquest of

Makkah are the excellent examples of the existence and significance of these relations. The Prophet of Islam (PBUH) availed the services of the non-Muslim experts and never harboured any religious prejudice.<sup>(10)</sup>

The Muslim Ummah continued this grand tradition of humanitarianism even after the departure of the Holy Prophet (PBUH). The Holy Caliphs (11-40 h), The Umayyad (41-132 h), The Abbasid (132-656 h) and the rulers of the Muslim Spain and the Turkish dynasty played an exemplary role in this regard.<sup>(11)</sup> The inter-faith dialogue between the Muslims and the non-Muslims reached its climax under the Muslim rule in India. The rulers of Delhi (1206-1526) and the great Mughals (1526-1857) promoted and supported the religious freedom and equality. The Muslim state of India earned a universal reputation during this period.<sup>(12)</sup> The followers of the other religions like Hinduism, Sikhism, Christianity and Buddhism were also the citizens of this great state which had its own distinctiveness and cultural and intellectual background. The Muslim rulers established excellent traditions of equality and justice in this multi-religious society. The rights of the non-Muslims were not only ensured but also protected. They were provided with the best possible educational and health facilities. Their festivals and rituals were shared and participated. They were honoured with higher ranks at various administrative levels. Their political consultation was not only sought but also honoured. Their religious heads were honoured and given the right to make judgements of individual and collective cases according to their own religious laws. They enjoyed the freedom of preaching their religion even in the court of the king. They were allowed to set up their places of worship in any part of the state and the best possible measures were taken for their protection. Friendly relations were established with a number of non-Muslim states which resulted in long-term trade-ties.<sup>(13)</sup> In short, the Muslim rulers promulgated a meaningful inter-faith dialogue with the non-Muslims by promoting an atmosphere of equality, justice, brotherhood, tolerance and sympathy.

The element of hatred, violence and distrust entered in the religious and social fabric of the United India with the arrival of the Europeans. The Portuguese were the first to reach India and other European nations started taking interest after seeing the Portuguese trade succeed. The Dutch, the British and the French also arrived here. Although, all these European nations were Christians by faith, but their commercial and political interests were different to the extent that they had to fight wars against one another in order to gain greater share of Indian trade in which the East India Company of England became victorious.<sup>(14)</sup> Since the Mughal Empire was passing through the worst

period of its political history, its role in this conflict was neutralized by the internal strife, and as a result, British gained increasing dominance in the region and improved their capabilities in the fields of warfare, politics and trade. Thus, the British became the all powerful masters of the sub-continent after the demise of the Mughal Empire. They took all the possible measures to gain maximum benefits and to consolidate their political dominance over the whole of the United India. Although, all sections of the society in the sub-continent, irrespective of their colour, caste, and creed, took part in the War of Freedom in 1857 against the British, yet the British considered the Muslims, due to their incumbency of rule, to be the sole perpetrators of this adventure. The British took every possible measure to particularly weaken the Muslims politically, culturally and religiously.

The British specifically planned against the Muslims keeping in view the deep loyalty and association of the Muslims of India with their religion. The British dominance in the region at the beginning of 19<sup>th</sup> Century opened the doors for the Christian priests in India. Missionaries from France, Germany and UK came to India in large numbers and started missionary activities in every nook and corner of the country.<sup>(15)</sup> They had the financial support from their respective missions and administrative support from the British government. A number of measures were used for the spread and propagation of Christianity including amending the Muslim Jurisprudence; the laws of inheritance and printing and publishing materials which were based upon prejudice and enmity against The Prophet of Islam (PBUH) and The Holy Quran. They also introduced and vigorously promoted English language in the educational institutions in place of Arabic, Persian and Urdu.

The anti-Islam steps taken by the British rulers had numerous educational, intellectual and cultural effects in India. First of all, the educational capacity of the Muslims was significantly reduced. The new educational system which was based on materialism, deeply affected the Muslims of India. The overall circumstances of the sub-continent became increasingly worse to the extent of weakening the intellectual, educational and religious capabilities of the Muslim community of India. However, the oppression gives birth to resistance. The nature took a magical turn and gave birth to a number of personalities who were equipped with intellectual, educational and mental abilities to combat the British influence. The Christian priests were helpless before the mental and educational abilities of these great Muslim scholars. They devoted their whole lives for the cause of service of Islam. The effects of this Muslim-

Christian conflict can be observed in the religious literature printed and published during this specific period.

The role of the Muslim scholars in the protection of the Muslim intellectualism and personal identity has been of historical importance. It is a historical fact that the Muslim scholars played an important role in protecting the cultural and civilizational identity of the Muslims of India after their defeat in the field of politics. Generally, the conquered nations copy the culture of the ruling elite, but, in India, Islam did not disappear from the social, cultural and spiritual lives of the Muslims. Rather, an awareness to protect their religious identity gained a foothold among the common Muslims. The Muslim Scholars played an important role in raising this awareness by publishing the religious literature which not only ended the doubts and suspicions spread by the Christian priests about Islam but also highlighted the weaknesses of the western philosophy and intellectualism. That is why, the polemical discourse has been very dominant in the religious literature of that period in which the element of emotions is very distinct along with the presence of solid arguments.

We should embrace the reality that the history of the Indo-Pak Sub-continent would have been no different from that of Spain and central Asian States if the Muslim scholars had not played their decisive role in protecting the religious identity of Muslims in this region. In the above-mentioned regions, the ruling nations consigned the Muslims and their culture to the pages of history.<sup>(16)</sup> The British rulers tried to do the same by encouraging the Christian Priests to go to every extent for the propagation of Christianity in India to promote their colonial interests.

The British Government used all tools available at its disposal for the propagation and promotion of Christianity in India. The European missionaries tried their best to spread the network of Christian activities in rural and urban areas of India by establishing an elaborate network of missionary schools in order to influence the minds of the children at an early age. They not only propagated what was best in Christianity but also left no stone unturned in condemning and harming the Islamic teachings and the Muslim Culture. Their basic objective was either to force the Muslims to leave their religion or at least not remain good Muslims. The Christian Priests made multi-dimensional efforts to confuse the Muslims religiously. They attacked the Holy personality of the Holy Prophet (PBUH). They also criticized the beliefs of the local population and challenged the Muslim Scholars for polemical discourses in the disguise of hospitals and other welfare institutions. In this way, they not only challenged the Muslim Scholars on different Islamic topics in the form of spoken discourses but also in the form of written discourses. The priests

did not only want to propagate Christianity but also to strengthen the government, socially and politically. On the other hand, they tried to deviate the young generations of the Muslims away from Islam and its universal message by instilling baseless doubts and suspicions in their minds. They tried their level best to harm the Muslims religiously, culturally and intellectually in the disguise of missionary activities.<sup>(17)</sup> They interpreted the Holy Quran and the Hadith as well as the Islamic educational and literary heritage according to their own particular angle.

In this specific perspective, the Muslim Scholars not only defended Islam and the Holy Prophet (SAW) but also exposed the bad intentions of the Christian Priests and worked tirelessly for the promotion of Islam. The Muslim scholars and intellectuals of India produced great literature to prove the universal truthfulness of Islam whose importance and usefulness has always been doubtless. They encountered the Christian Priests at each and every level by responding to them through verbal as well as written discourses. The polemical material which took birth from the mutual interactions of the Muslims and the Christians during the ninety-year period from 1857 to 1947 has been preserved in the pages of history.<sup>(18)</sup>

This literature based on 90 years of educational and literary heritage and intellectual history is a great source of knowledge about the attitudes and behaviours of the two religious communities. It highlights the misunderstandings and the attitude of intolerance through this period. The details of this literature are very important and useful for the success of the inter-faith dialogue between the Muslims and the Christians.

The polemical relationship between the Muslims and the Christians during the British regime in India created a political and social conflict between the two nations; however, after the division of Indo-Pak, both nations realized the importance of mutual tolerance and equality. Probably, the deprivation of political power created a sense of tolerance, equality and justice among the Christians. Therefore, after the creation of Pakistan, the mutual relations between the Muslims and the Christians began to improve in religious and socio-political fields. Since the conflict brought about the consequences which cannot be considered positive, its intensity decreased after the departure of the British from India. Today, both communities understand the need of dialogue instead of a polemical and controversial discourse.<sup>(19)</sup> The era of globalization is actually the era of the inter-faith dialogue. Instead of abusing each other, the dialogue creates an atmosphere of understanding one another's beliefs on the grounds of knowledge acquired on the principles of research. The religious literature is evaluated to understand one another and to bring the mutual prejudice and enmity to an end. Now, the Muslim and the Christian

scholars are of a strong opinion that they should avail one another's knowledge resources to bring about harmony, welfare and peace instead of wasting their time in futile discourses.<sup>(20)</sup>

### **3. Contemporary Challenges to Interfaith Dialogue in Pakistan:**

The mutual dialogue between the Muslim and the Christian scholars has not only encouraged the followers of other religions to lay the foundations of pleasant mutual relations but it has also created a very positive image of Pakistan globally. The followers of different religions in Pakistan are aware of the fact that only mutual dialogue, pleasant social relations and elimination of prejudices can lead Pakistan towards the way of prosperity and progress. However, the sad fact of this matter is that a number of religious, ethnic and sectarian groups are still confused and do not comprehend the process, nature and objectives of this inter-faith dialogue.<sup>(21)</sup> That is why, the success of the inter-faith dialogue faces a number of challenges in Pakistan. Some extremist religious sects have been spreading negative propaganda that the minorities in Pakistan have secret relations with some foreign powers which are against our national interests. Some people have not yet been able to come out of the British era Muslim-Christian polemical conflict. They wish to continue having the relationship with the Christians based on disharmony, intolerance, prejudice and enmity as they still are unable to forget how the Muslims were treated by the British Christians in the politico-religious fields of life. These groups are academically unaware of the beliefs of others and have no understanding of the present day world. On the other hand, the religious minorities living in Pakistan have also shown an irresponsible attitude. They have opposed the law of blasphemy instead of publically condemning blasphemy. Another sad fact in this regard is that the people who are accused of blasphemy run away from the country instead of defending themselves. The governments of the countries which are predominantly Christians not only defend them but also honour them with a great protocol. Some Hindus in Sindh are also responsible for the slowness and semi-failure of this inter-faith dialogue. The instances of their migration from Pakistan to India are very few, but the media propagates these incidents on a large scale. The background of these incidents is usually social and economic instead of religious, but it is generally highlighted that the Hindu girls are forced to change their faith marry Muslims against their will. The situation created by different individuals and groups has negatively affected the communication and positive relations among the different religious communities. This has badly dented the various steps of the inter-faith dialogue.

In this religious, social, geographical and political prospective, it is extremely necessary for the Pakistani nation to promote attitudes and take steps which are useful to create an environment conducive to inter-faith dialogue. In this regard, an impartial analysis of the factors and motives which prove to be the major hurdles in the way of this dialogue is necessary. It is also equally necessary to have a thorough study of the basic challenges faced on the way of the inter-faith dialogue in the present global scenario of religious, political and social instability, intolerance and disharmony. It is the need of the hour that all the religious groups and sects have a thorough and impartial study of these challenges and devise ways and mechanisms which can bring an end to these challenges and lay down the foundations of co-existence, peace and harmony in the society. An impartial study and analysis of these challenges is going to be presented here.

**i. Inadequate understanding of the true nature and spirit of the dialogue:**

The success of the inter-faith dialogue depends upon the collective intellect and common sense of the individuals and nations. The ground reality is that the common people do not know anything about the spirit and nature of this dialogue; they are rather confused about it. Some people consider it as the mixing of different religious faiths. Some people consider it as their first and the foremost duty to make statements against it.<sup>(22)</sup> The Indo-Pak history is full of such intellectual conflicts. A long history of polemical discourse has been a cause of enmity and hatred. It is the need of the hour to raise awareness among the common masses about the meaning, nature, objectives and procedure of this dialogue.

**ii. The lack of collective common sense and intellect of being Pakistani**

The religious, regional, linguistic and tribal identities of the Pakistanis have negatively affected the sense of national pride. The small groups and sects have suppressed the common-sense and intellect of the Pakistanis. They are deprived of the right of expression. The sense of being a united nation is almost out of sight. The confused and unclear concept of identities has not given a chance of nourishment and promotion to religious equality.<sup>(23)</sup> The inter-faith dialogue cannot take place among nations in such circumstances and different communities cannot avail of the fruits of such an activity.

**iii. Misconceptions about other religions**

The source of information for the followers of other religions living in Pakistan about the other religions is based on a prejudiced and partial religious literature which creates confusions and apprehensions among them. The young followers and learners of any religion begin to consider



the other religions and their followers as inferiors. The tales of superiority of their religion often dominate their young minds. The orthodox and non-clear concepts promote extremism, hatred, torture and mutual disputes among the followers of different religions.<sup>(24)</sup> In these circumstances, it is the need of the hour to introduce a collective educational curriculum based on the collective teachings of different religions. The experts of all the religions should participate in this activity for a common cause.

#### **iv. The un-fair use of religion for political interest and personal revenge**

The fair and practical use of a religion is the expression of its utility how attractive, fascinating and charming a religious concept is. The negative use of religion brings about negative results. All the objections and apprehensions raised against the constitution making process in Pakistan are political and individual in nature. The amendments made in the constitution relating the elections is an example of it. The minorities have to take part in the provincial and national assembly elections as separate and sometimes as collective. In local bodies elections, they are sometimes elected directly and sometimes indirectly.<sup>(25)</sup> It has been observed that the blasphemy law has been used for social and economic reasons by some individuals and groups. To blame any non-Muslim of blasphemy is neither any service to Pakistan nor to Islam.<sup>(26)</sup> The absence and non-participation of the non-Muslims in the constitution making process is also a hurdle in the way of the Inter-faith dialogue.

#### **v. The Improper Attitude of the so-called Muslim Ulma**

Overall, the overwhelming majority of learned Muslim Ulma has always played a very positive role to develop a socio-religious understanding among different and diverse followers of several religions. But, Unfortunately, a small minority of so-called scholars has mislead the common masses and raised walls of misunderstanding, religious prejudice and sectarian enmity among the supporters of different religious faiths. There is a big gap between the conservatives and the liberals which does not allow them to conduct an urgent Inter-Faith dialogue. The internal sectarianism is the main cause of this intellectual conflict. Confusions and apprehensions about the understanding of the nature, objectives, resources and procedure of the inter-faith dialogue have been developed and propagated.<sup>(27)</sup> Different religious groups and organizations have been accusing one another of promoting and sponsoring terrorism. Misconception of Jehaad is another challenge for the success of inter-faith dialogue. Undoubtedly, Jehaad guarantees the protection of the lives and rights of the people of all religions and sects, but, sometimes, it has not been understood with its true spirit. The so-called ulma have been

misinterpreting and misusing this great asset of Islam in their personal favours. Sometimes, it has been used as an unfair and unjust tool against the non-Muslim minorities.<sup>(28)</sup> The religious prejudiced literature is another big hurdle in the way of initiating and promoting an inter-faith dialogue.<sup>(29)</sup> This literature created a very negative religious environment in the Sub-Continent. The mutual dialogue can only be started after banning such poisonous literature by the followers of all the religions. This atmosphere of hatred, enmity, torture and fear has damaged badly the mutual understanding of the multidimensional socio-political life of the society. In the prevailing prejudiced religious literature and the non-cooperative attitude of the so-called religious leaders, the initiative of Inter-Faith Dialogue is almost next to possible.

#### **vi. The Poor Role of Political Parties**

The success of inter-faith dialogue, directly, depends upon the socio-political structure of any particular country. It is, universally, admitted that it is the first and foremost responsibility of the state to safeguard and secure the basic human rights of all the segments of the society. But, unfortunately, the state institutions and the constitutional structure of Pakistan have not been mobile, dynamic and effective in this regard. The political parties of Pakistan have been so-called supporters and forerunners of equal human rights for all the communities of the state so far as their political agenda is concerned. But, they have not been able to play any positive and remarkable role for this purpose. The political leaders of Pakistan, undoubtedly, can play a key role to minimize and check the tendencies of extremism, torture and inequality in the society. They can establish a better and strong connection with the common citizen of the state through their political members, activists and workers. They may have the access at locality and town level towards the followers of all the religions, cultures and sects. Such cultural activities can be laid down and promoted through these connections. The people belonging to different languages, religions and geographies may participate and share their feelings and thoughts with one another through such activities. These ceremonies may take several shapes; sports and games, literary gatherings and cultural events etc. These cultural forums may provide an outlet to all the people belonging to several cultural and religious backgrounds to get together and come closer and closer. Thus, the mental and physical distances can be lessened among the religious groups of the society.<sup>(30)</sup> In the light of above mentioned facts and environment, it can be said that an effective strategy to promote the inter-faith dialogue may not be fruitful in the absence of a beneficial and active cooperation of the political parties.

#### 4. Recommendations

In the light of above detailed analysis, it can be safely said that Pakistan should function as a well-balanced and temperate religious state because of its multi-religious population and its important geographical location. Only the feelings of mutual equality, tolerance and respect can guarantee an ideal situation in the religious and social fields of life. The religious scenario of Pakistan presented above does not match with the demands of the present day world. There are apparently no chances of the success of an inter-faith dialogue in the present unfavorable conditions of Pakistan. There is a dire need to bring the problems, issues and challenges to an end which are considered to be a threat to the concept of this dialogue. The following proposals and recommendations are made in this regard.

- i. The political, executive and social set up of the country must be made pro-inter-faith dialogue.
- ii. Every anti-non-Muslim activity based on hatred and prejudice should be dealt with iron hands. Immediate constitutional amendments are necessary in this regard. Moreover, a detailed review and analysis of the current constitutional clauses related to the non-Muslim minorities is necessary and the disputed clauses in the current constitution should be amended or abolished.
- iii. Police and Judiciary should be active and dynamic in the prospective of the sensitivity of such issues related to the non-Muslims. Necessary measures should be taken after a thorough and impartial investigation of such issues. Undue haste in such matters should be avoided. Specially, the accused of blasphemy should be protected inside and outside the prison before his judicial trail and judgment.
- iv. Effective and impartial constitutional amendments should be made to stop the forced change of religion.
- v. The sectarian and prejudiced religious literature should be banned.
- vi. Inter-Faith Dialogue should be given proper importance in the educational curriculum and the points based on religious prejudice should be removed instantly.
- vii. The political parties must allow and encourage the followers of all the faiths and sects to join them. Rather, they must be given all kinds of opportunities and rights to prosper there.
- viii. The quota of employment for the religious minorities at all levels should be increased. Moreover, the overall procedure of employment for the non-Muslim minorities should be reviewed and improved.
- ix. The religious discrimination related to electoral laws and Election Commission should be eliminated and every possible effort should be made to allow them to join the national stream.

x. The concept and significance of Inter-Faith Dialogue should be promoted through teachers, scholars, writers, journalists, intellectuals, artists and politicians.

### **5. Conclusion**

All possible efforts to promote Inter-Faith Dialogue are generally in the favour of the Muslims of the entire globe and especially in the best possible interest of the Pakistani Muslims. People of the faiths and sects can be unchained from the clutches of extremism, torture, hatred and enmity. Flowers of mutual harmony and love can be blossomed through such efforts. The great humanitarian teachings of Islam are a certain key in promoting Inter-Faith Dialogue in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. Islam does not allow at all to abuse, rebuke and accuse baselessly on the basis of religious differences. The Muslims treated the followers and supporters of all the religions equally on the basis of equity and justice irrespective of colour, caste and creed. The basic human rights of the non-Muslim minorities were not only safeguarded but insured. They were provided with the best possible facilities of education and health. Their festivals were shared and celebrated collectively. The Muslim Rulers themselves participated and honoured such ceremonies. The non-Muslims were appointed at the highest posts. They were consulted and honoured in political and state affairs. Contrary to these ideal historical facts, today, Pakistan is facing the worst wave of extremism and non-forbearance. These are numerous hurdles in the way of conducting and promoting Inter-Faith Dialogue. It is the need of the hour today to face the challenges present in the way of initiating this dialogue in the prevailing socio-political and religious circumstances of the globe. It is our collective misfortune that most of the people are unaware of the true spirit and meanings of such a dialogue. The sense of being a nation is vanishing swiftly from the national scene. Unnecessary misconceptions are being spread against the rest of the religions. The religion is being used for personal motives and revenges. The political and religious leaders have disappointed the common masses in this critical and decisive situation. It is the dire need of the present day world in the context of the prevailing sensitive socio-political situation to create favourable circumstances to initiate Inter-Faith Dialogue in Pakistan. The government, judiciary, police, media, the religious scholars and intellectuals should play a positive and responsible role in this regard. They should try their level best to remove all the barriers present in the way of the multidimensional progress of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan.

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