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**Author (s):** **Qiamuddin Khan**  
**Dr. Muhammad Atif Aslam Rao**  
Department of Islamic Learning, University of Karachi, Pakistan

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## Urban Labor, Faith and Inequality: An Analytical History of Christian Economic and Construction Contributions in Karachi

**Qiamuddin Khan**

Ph.D Research Scholar, Department of Islamic Learning, University of Karachi, Pakistan. Email: [qiamo012@gmail.com](mailto:qiamo012@gmail.com)

**Dr. Muhammad Atif Aslam Rao**

Assistant Professor, Department of Islamic Learning, University of Karachi, Pakistan. Email: [dratifrao@uok.edu.pk](mailto:dratifrao@uok.edu.pk)

### **Abstract**

*This study provides a historical and analytical examination of the economic, labor and urban development contributions of the Christian community in Karachi from the colonial period to the contemporary era. As one of the city's oldest community, Christians have been sincerely engaged in education, healthcare, municipal services and construction since the colonial period. Based on historical and analytical approach, this paper traces their professional patterns, migration after Partition and contributions to urban structure and municipal organizations. In spite of their vital role in city-infrastructure, they are remained economically relegated and socially marginalized. The study resulted that operational disparities, professional stereotyping and unfair political representation have limited further advancement of Christian community as they are largely overlooked in dominant accounts of Karachi's urbanization. By highlighting these disregarded contributions, the paper pursues to fill a gap on Christian minorities and urban growth in academic world and calls for a more comprehensive understanding of Karachi's historical development. Though paper based on minority relegation, limited attention has been paid to their structure and economic contribution. The paper is conducted on historical and analytical lines centered on secondary, archival and urban historiographic sources. The paper also concludes by emphasizing the need for inclusive urban policies that recognize the contributions of minority labor address spatial and economic inequalities and promote equitable access to education, financial and urban development opportunities.*

**Keywords:** Christian community, Construction, Urban development, Minority, Karachi.

## Introduction

Christian community is an oldest minority in Karachi. They were established before the creation of Pakistan and have since become the integral part of the city. Since the middle of the nineteenth century, when Karachi developed as a small port to an important British colonial center, Christians have played main role in urbanization of the city. They have played a critical role in the provision of municipal services, healthcare, education and construction supporting the city's daily operation as well as its physical and social development. However, their role in history is commonly relegated to the periphery or excluded altogether. Narratives on politics elites, industrialists or the major religious groups seldom appreciate the work behind the modernization of Karachi.<sup>1</sup> Basically, prevailing literature on Christian minority in Pakistan leaned towards to mob attacks, forced conversion, social, economic, state planning, ethnic politics and educational discrimination often ignoring their daily labor and technical contribution in city structure. Consequently, Christians in education, healthcare, construction and municipal services remains undervalued in majority urban historiography, despite its historic worth. Therefore it asks, how did Christian labor contribute to Karachi's economic and structural development, and why did these contributions remain socially and historically overlooked? The paper provides a historical and analytical perspective of the position of economic and city building activities of the Christian community in Karachi. It analyzes the relationship between colonial labor relations, migration after the partition and urban governance in the post-colonial period in affecting occupational structures, economic performance and inequality in the long run.

Moreover, this paper is based on archival sources, secondary literatures, urban historical accounts and missionary records. Rather than focusing on mixed methods, the paper conducts explanatory analysis to result permanent solution of labor division, structural disparity and industrial allocation.

## Pre-Partition and Early Colonial Roots

The settlement of Christians in Karachi is associated with the mid to late nineteenth century colonial growth of the British in Sindh. European missionaries, Goan Catholics and Anglo-Indians minority community were the first in Karachi to stable their foundations.<sup>2</sup> These organizations established mission churches,

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Amjad-Ali, "From Dislocation to Dislocation: The Experience of the Christian Community in Pakistan," *International Review of Modern Sociology* 41, no. 1 (2015): 1–28, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43496499>.

<sup>2</sup> Maria-Magdalena Fuchs and Simon Wolfgang Fuchs, "Religious Minorities in Pakistan: Identities, Citizenship and Social Belonging," *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 43, no. 1 (2020): 52–67.

schools, hospitals and charitable institutions predominantly in the old town and cantonment regions. The institutions were used in religious and educational capacities and created opportunities of economic and social unification with the colonial government. Mission schools served two purposes. They encouraged literacy, English language and professional skills even as they trained the students in being employed by colonial bureaucracy and service. Most of the graduates got roles related to clerking in railways, postal service, municipal office and hospitals.<sup>3</sup> These jobs provided fairly reliable incomes and social mobility under the colonial system, but reduced Christians to an interested workforce also single-market. The strategic location of Karachi as a port also increased the opportunities resulting in the influx of technicians, expert workers and administrators in other regions of British India.

When the Christians were initially placed in municipal and service jobs, the occupational specialization was brought forth and this continued after the colonialists. In Karachi Clerical, educational or health jobs offered the benefit of stability but impaired the accumulation of wealth and higher status occupations, such as in commerce or politics. The mission institutions assisted Christians to create a clearly defined minority infrastructure strengthening community recognitions and cohesiveness around culture, though it also cemented clustering in occupations<sup>4</sup>.

### **Post-Partition Migration and Community Expansion**

The Karachi 1947 partition had been a catalyst to some radical demographic, economic and spatial transformation. There was a massive intake of Punjabi Christians who increased the community. Contrary to the richer Muslim migrants who may or may not have had capital or had business networks most Christian migrants came into the country with very little capital or even job opportunities and therefore relied on the existing networks as well as new employment opportunities to settle down.<sup>5</sup> New Christian dominated neighborhoods like *Essa Nagri*, *Pahar Ganj*, Catholic Colony and subsequent parts in *Korangi* and *Landhi* were brought about by the migration wave. These locations tended to be close to industrial areas, city projects or locations of affordable housing, as the community would be incorporated into urban workplaces. The high speed of urbanization and inadequate planning on the part of the municipalities resulted in over-populated areas with scarcity of infrastructure, small plots and community resource sharing.

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<sup>3</sup> J. Baillie, *Karachi under British Rule* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1890), 82–83.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>5</sup> Ayra Indrias Patras and Ahmed Usman, “Intersection of Gender, Work and Caste: The Case of Christian Female Sweepers of Lahore,” *Journal of the Research Society of Pakistan* 56 (2019): 364.

These quarters fostered social unity and local connections as well as strengthening spatial division in working-class districts.

Immigration after Partition resulted in even greater Christian involvement in municipal, educational, medical and structure activities. Karachi Municipal Corporation (KMC) departments and sanitation units, as well as hospitals hired many migrants as workforces. This expansion strengthened the settlement of the community in urban areas of strategic concern but also institutionalized the occupational concentration because the access to new, well-paid jobs in the private sector was still limited by structural factors, social stereotypes and the lack of integration. This sustained economic marginalization and ultimately unheeded community in low- to middle-income service jobs, which defined intergenerational results.<sup>6</sup>

### **Historical Occupational Structure**

The colonialists engaged in Karachi had a diverse range of administrative, technical and service positions, which were undertaken by the Christians at that time. The common jobs involved clerical work, teaching, nursing, railway jobs and technical jobs. These professions gave social respect and safety, but seldom resulted in much amassing of wealth or more important statuses within the greater urban economy. Occupational diversity had been reduced after independence. Christians were considerably concentrated in city sanitation, municipal hospitals and lower-middle-technical and teaching jobs in mission schools. These patterns were supported by limited presence in the private sector, social stereotyping and institutional methods of hiring. Although the employment in municipal and public sectors was stable with low chances of unemployment, higher employment with advancement or salary increase was minimal as it resulted in economic devolution, which established the intergenerational economic limitations.<sup>7</sup>

Particular attention to health-care professions was given to nurses, midwives and women who were helping in hospitals, Christian women were particularly needed in such jobs. They also carried out large portions of domestic labor that assisted Christian families in getting a living. Even though they continued to serve the society and business in the public and private sphere, they were little paid and had little opportunities to increase their financial status. The work of women was

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<sup>6</sup> Saeed Ahmed Butt, "Contextualizing Economic Challenges and Opportunities of Minorities in Pakistan: A Case Study of the Christian Community in Lahore," *Pakistan Vision* 24, no. 2 (2023): 20.

<sup>7</sup> Bashir Ahmed Jatoi and Yong-a Zhang, "Karachi as an Urban Center of Nationalism: Colonial Urbanization and Political Mobilization (1913–1947)," *Zenodo* (CERN European Organization for Nuclear Research), March 31, 2025, 4–7, <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15166013>.

necessary to make the community stronger but they tended to remain in the conventional settings that reduced their economic development.

These patterns of work designs provided a stable financial world over many years. The employment was stable, without any large opportunity to accumulate a fortune. The families of Christianity enjoyed live sufficiently and then used their money to get basic education and to exist, but not to purchase property and to start business. Children inherited the same occupations and Christians dwelt in the low- and middle-income areas, which perpetuated an economic status revolving cycle, which characterizes the neighborhood up to the present day<sup>8</sup>.

### **Construction and Urban Development Contributions**

Between the fifties and the nineties, Karachi became a rapid growth. The development of industries, increase of population and the construction of government roads and buildings converted a colonial port into the busy city of streets, houses, offices and schools. This transformation was being constructed by Christian workers. They were carpenters, plumbers, electricians, masons and general laborers. They served both the government of the city and in the private contractors. The Christian workers constructed numerous projects through Karachi Municipal Corporation (KMC) and privately owned companies: houses, apartment blocks, offices, schools, hospitals, roads, drains and sewage systems. They included planning, skilled and semi-skilled work, on-site coordination and maintenance in their work. They were also involved in informal neighborhood work where they assisted in restoring houses and in minor infrastructure. They were there and this city expanded in various aspects. Christians also constructed major social amenities. Christian masons and carpenters commonly built fixed and renovated churches, mission schools, hospitals and community halls. These were used not only by Christians, but also by Muslims, Hindu and so on. Thousands were educated in schools, hospitals and halls provided health care and places of gathering and this illustrated how Christian labor contributed to the Karachi construction of both material and social foundations.<sup>9</sup>

The Christian workers are, however, seldom referred to in the standard city histories in spite of these massive contributions. They are hardly ever named in official stories and policy reports and receive lower wages and are fewer in promotions and less professionally accepted. This is termed by the scholars as the silent workforce since their crucial work remains unnoticed when performed by a minority group. Their marginalization in the history is wider: it is not always a significant work that makes one visible and powerful.

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<sup>8</sup> Butt, "Contextualizing Economic Challenges and Opportunities," 20-21.

<sup>9</sup> Amjad-Ali, "From Dislocation to Dislocation," 17-19.

### **Financial Status (A Historical and Structural Analysis)**

Historical factors, rather than the failure of the individuals, are the cause of the poor finances of many Christian families in Karachi. The service jobs offered in the colonial time provided a stable income without many opportunities to accumulate wealth, land and open businesses. Other occupations like clerks, teachers, health workers and municipal employees provided security and dignity but stopped any further advancement after some specific thresholds.

Most Christians following independence were in the low- and middle-income service occupations: sanitation, hospital assistance and technical trades. This was due to stereotypes and social expectations that put them in areas of low payments, little leadership opportunities and limited credit access. Absence of political voice implied reduced access of government funds and planning, which made them increasingly marginalized economically<sup>10</sup>. The personal and system-wide discrimination also undermined the promotion, as the new economic order preserved the old economic order.

There are individuals who are Christians who have even taken a significant step. Training is effective: alumni of mission schools and graduates of vocational training are employed in the NGOs, government and professional health care. Migration abroad to Europe, North America and gulf, brings back remittances which fund homes of the middle classes. However, those who become financially secure are only a small number of Christians, as they continue to have poor employment, low wages and insecure shelter<sup>11</sup>.

The churches, mission schools and charities alleviate poverty. Scholarships, job training and welfare programs subject some families to subsistence. Such assistants are lopsided and they are not sufficient to prevent greater structural issues. In this way, Christian families continue to be at the heart of city functioning and development with being marginalized economically.

### **Contemporary Economic Conditions (Analytical Overview)**

Modern Christians are largely employed in health care, municipal, education, non-governmental organizations and some private work. The most common jobs are still nursing, teaching, sanitation and trades. These are good for some stability but not much opportunity of getting better pay or long-term stability. The increasing costs of living in the city, housing, utilities, transport and health care among others lead to the working classes of Christians living more difficult lives.

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<sup>10</sup> Muhammad Nazeer Kaka Khel, "Status of Non-Muslim Minorities in Pakistan," *Islamic Studies* 23, no. 1 (1984): 52–53, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20847254>.

<sup>11</sup> International Monetary Fund (IMF), "Remittances: Funds for the Folks Back Home," February 5, 2019.

Christian families traditionally have difficulties getting formal loans and purchasing property and also lack ease of obtaining credit. Most depend on community lending or money remittance by relatives abroad that is not very secure and leaves them stuck in economic predicament. They are also vulnerable to exploitation, job insecurity as well as workplace occupational risks in the informal sectors of construction and sanitation. Formal banking, credit and property ownership is limited. Elaborate financial systems such as community lending or overseas remittances are used by many Christians. Such arrangements are only partially secure and have individuals in economic precocity. Unofficial work in construction and sanitation increases the chances of being exploited, being insecure and getting into work-related risks<sup>12</sup>.

The economic mobility is primarily achieved through education. Families that have access to good education, professional trainings and career relations are likely to shift to the income ladder and become middle-income families. In comparison to that, families that do not get an education usually remain in the cycle of low wages, as work-related choices can only be municipal jobs, unskilled construction or housekeeping<sup>13</sup>. This distance depicts disparity in the distribution of opportunity within the community and also indicates the structural obstacles that dominate modern economic results.

### **Structural and Systemic Barriers**

The economy of Karachi Christians is still influenced by structural and systemic limitations. The geographical segregation has congested the community in certain neighborhoods which lack proper infrastructure, lack in financing of government facilities, as well as access to quality educational facilities and facilities in the health sector. This physical marginalization contributes to occupation clustering and makes residents to depend on the local occupations in the sanitation, building and technical trades. Discrimination in areas of hiring, promotion and compensation is being faced by the minority. There is both blatant and subtle discrimination in workplaces of both public and private employment, which restricts the career advancements of the Christian labor force. The uses of stereotypes associating Christians with some occupations that require much labor also isolate the community to the low and middle-income environment. These

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<sup>12</sup> Butt, "Contextualizing Economic Challenges and Opportunities," 21–23.

<sup>13</sup> United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *Pakistan National Human Development Report 2020: Inequality, Growth, and Human Development* (Islamabad: UNDP Pakistan, 2020), 119.

limitations impact on single-family households and support economic inequality in the community.<sup>14</sup>

These structural problems are enhanced by political marginalization. Most towns that have been predominantly Christian may have low inputs in the planning and policymaking of their municipalities minimizing access to infrastructure, schools, health care and development of cities. The absence of a political voice backfires the development of the community to influence the decisions, which directly impact the living conditions and economic opportunities<sup>15</sup>. All of these social, political and structural barriers perpetuate intergenerational inequality, which strengthens the historical tendencies of marginalization and economic restrictions.

### **Contributions to Karachi's Social and Civic Landscape**

The Christian fraternity gives far more than work and economic output. Education is one of the long-term legacies. The corporate boards of missionary schools established by the European and Goan Christians in the colonial and postcolonial periods have educated generations of students regardless of their religions and socioeconomic background. Such schools as St. Patrick High School, St. Joseph Convent and most of the smaller mission schools played significant roles in educating English, science and job skills. These colleges equipped students with professional and bureaucratic jobs as well as paved way to social mobility ordaining human capital of Karachi.

Another field that the Christians have influenced is health care. Hospitals in Karachi have long been mostly staffed by Christian nurses, midwives and hospital workers particularly during any public health crisis like epidemics, high infant death and in sanitation problem. Through providing necessary medical care, Christian professionals significantly increased the welfare of the citizens and contribution to making the city stay strong in the conditions of the rapid population growth and the insufficiency of the municipal resources.

These efforts have been supplemented by church-based charities, religious organizations as well as community non-governmental organizations. Christian communities have provided education, welfare, disaster aid and community development usually to Christian and non-Christian inhabitants. The mission hospitals and clinics targeted areas that were neglected by the government infrastructure and the welfare programs offered scholarships, vocational training

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<sup>14</sup> Akhtar Hussain, "Urban Sprawl, Infrastructure Deficiency and Economic Inequalities in Karachi," *Research Gate* 28, no. 2 (January 6, 2016): 1689–96.

<sup>15</sup> Rachel C. Schneider et al., "How Religious Discrimination Is Perceived in the Workplace: Expanding the View," *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World* 8 (January 2022).

and emergency.<sup>16</sup> These donations helped enhance the pluralistic identity of Karachi, enabled social cohesion and provided an element of resistance to those neighborhoods that had suffered structural neglect although they were economically and politically marginal.

### **Comparative Analytical Reflection**

There are comparisons to indicate that Christian economic mobility takes an alternative route compared to the other minority groups in Karachi. As an example, *Parsis* traditionally had an earlier access to capital, business contacts and industrial activities and thus could accumulate wealth, as well as, gain a stable future<sup>17</sup>. On the contrary, Christians were largely restricted to service and manual work like municipal works, health care, education and construction. This restriction curtailed their saving capacity, capital accumulation ability, membership in powerful circles and the ability to pass wealth across generations. Even though there have been educational advancements, NGO employment and restrictive professional growth has enabled some Christians to advance between generations, they have never achieved economic equality with more successful minority groups<sup>18</sup>. There are still financial and occupational inequalities that can prove the effective enduring effects of the historic division of labor, stereotyping of social groups and poor institutional reinforcement. Presumptive data imply that economic inequalities have not decreased but stayed even, which continues to support the role structural inequalities and spatial marginality play in determining community outcomes.

### **Theoretical and Analytical Framework**

In this paper Structural Inequality Theory and Urban Marginality Theory have been utilized to learn how Christians historically and currently stand within the borders of Karachi. Structural Inequality Theory emphasizes the way the occupational stereotypes, past labor placement and institutional actions continue to marginalize disadvantages between generations. In this perspective, the fact that Christians are restricted to service and building tasks is a phenomenon that is

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<sup>16</sup> Farman Ali, Hafiz Waqas Khan, Shehla Riaz, Ikram ul Haq, and Kamran Ahmed, "The Historical Evolution of Christianity in Pakistan: Missionary Influence, Caste Dynamics, and the Challenge of Theological Contextualization," *Journal of Islamic Thought and Civilization* 15, no. 1 (2025): 401–17.

<sup>17</sup> Afshin Marashi, "'Rich Fields in Persia': Parsi Capital and the Origins of Economic Development in Pahlavi Iran, 1925–1941," *Iranian Studies* 56, no. 1 (May 11, 2022): 61–83.

<sup>18</sup> Asim Iqbal et al., "Gender Equality, Education, Economic Growth and Religious Tensions Nexus in Developing Countries: A Spatial Analysis Approach," *Heliyon* 8, no. 11 (November 2022): e11394.

not chosen by individuals but is rather systemic since some historical trends did not allow wealth accumulation, possession of capital and political power.

Urban Marginality Theory brings in a space prism. Christians are present in the neighborhoods that are at the boundary of industrial and municipal areas where they have little access to good infrastructure, schools and access to services provided.<sup>19</sup> Spatial segregation contributes to the clustering of occupation and inhibits investment in higher-income occupations. Combined, these structures identify a paradox that Christians have been instrumental in the economic and physical development of Karachi, but they are not grasped in historical and contemporary policy. The theories help in enlightening the processes involved in economic stagnation and marginalization that provide a platform on which policies are analyzed.

### **Policy Implications**

The results of the study indicate a number of policy interventions. First, put more emphasis on education and skill training of Christian youth and in particular, technical, professional and management to dissolve occupational clusters and enhance upward mobility. The mentioning of scholarship programs, skill-building programs and mentoring programs may expand access to high-value jobs.

Second, Christian households can eliminate past obstacles to wealth accumulation by financial measures like access to credit, microfinance, entrepreneurship programs and community-based savings programs. Economic empowerment is necessary through improved access to networks of banking, ownership of property and businesses.

Third, urban planning/ renewal programs ought to focus on such infrastructural shortage as Christian dominated neighborhoods. This encompasses schools, medical institutions, roads, sanitation and the open areas. The city can promote even-handed development and diminish the spatial marginality by incorporating minority-conscious policies in a municipal and provincial agenda.

Lastly, a social inclusion can be promoted through formal acknowledgement of Christian contribution to the Karachi social and physical landscape. The recognition of people, their history and presenting the cultural story in an inclusive and non-racist way can dispel stereotypes, empower civic identity and provide the marginalized community a sense of belonging.

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<sup>19</sup> Leonard E. Egede, Rebekah J. Walker, and Joni S. Williams, "Addressing Structural Inequalities, Structural Racism, and Social Determinants of Health: A Vision for the Future," *Journal of General Internal Medicine* 39, no. 3 (September 22, 2023): 487–91, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11606-023-08426-7>.

### **Conclusion**

The historical experience of Christians in Karachi shows that it is a community that is entrenched into the economic, social and physical development of the city but continues to be persistently ignored. Since Karachi was founded and developed on clerical and service positions during the colonial era, Christian input has played a key role in the operation and growth of the city in the postcolonial era. The economic mobility, accumulation of capital and political representation have however been constrained as a result of structure.

This history is crucial in understanding how to come up with inclusive urban policy. It stresses the importance of minority labor and contributes to eliminating the economic inequalities that will create a lasting problem. History-analytic research of minority groups helps identify those structural aspects that inform intergenerational inequality and also identifies intervention programs directed. Further exploration of the works of the Christians and other marginalized communities can be used to develop measures that can ensure the creation of fair urban development, community integration and acknowledgment of all elements that have molded the biggest city in Pakistan.