

# **South Asia Forum for Freedom of Religion or Belief ( SAFFoRB) 6th South Asia Regional Meeting 9 to 11 December, 2022**

## **Statement**

South Asia is a region rich in pluralism with religious and cultural diversities. It is also a complex region with multitudes of communities, some forming majority communities in few countries at the same time being minorities in neighboring countries. Interestingly, after the freedom struggles in many of these countries, the constitutions were religion neutral ensuring rights and freedoms to all individuals irrespective of their religious, caste, linguistic and ethnic identities. However, there have been large-scale violations of freedom of religion and belief in South Asia.

The dominant ideologies in these countries have constructed a lopsided narrative of nationalism built on the demonization and exclusion of vulnerable groups like, religious minorities, ethnic minorities, Dalits, indigenous communities, women, non-religious groups etc. The demonization of vulnerable groups carefully cultivated and promoted by the states and resulting hatred are unfortunately normalized today. These narratives complimented with discriminatory laws and policies and rise of violent extremism- largely backed by state and emboldened vigilante groups working with impunity, have marginalized vulnerable communities. Some of this marginalization has taken the forms of displacement and forced statelessness in the case of Rohingyas, civil war in Sri Lanka, political instability in Pakistan, authoritarianism in India, military junta rule in Myanmar. This has led to human trauma, loss of lives and property. These are serious human rights violations.

Perhaps what is most stark and needs a special mention with respect to majoritarianism is the disproportionate impact it has had on women. The patriarchy, illiberal interpretation of religious scriptures and majoritarianism have led to double discrimination of women. The freedom of religion or belief is especially starkly violated for women when in the name of religion, they are suppressed in their own communities. The civil society organizations and civic space which raises these crucial issues are coming under attack from the states which use surveillance, laws and intimidation to muzzle dissent, freedom of expression and assembly. This shrinking civil society space is a serious concern and directly has an impact on FoRB.

Way Forward:

These countries have their own unique challenges at the same time there are great overlapping areas and opportunities for them to work collectively to promote FoRB and strategize against majoritarianism and lopsided nationalism. The individual member organizations and country chapter's FoRB works need to be strengthened. These strategies and responses should be gender sensitive. There is inherent diversity and pluralism in each

country and community. Pluralism and democracy are antidotes to majoritarianism. Thus, strengthening democratic institutions and cultural diversity within each community should be one of the responses to majoritarianism. A dispassionate and honest reflection on the discriminatory tendencies within our own religions is imperative to promote FoRB.

The South Asian communities are dynamic with fast changing social realities, there is an urgent need for us to individually and collectively re-invent ourselves and especially a new vocabulary on FoRB- construct and deconstruct in different contexts. This new vocabulary and discourse on forb will help us connect with grassroots and build awareness about FoRB. While FoRB is a way to prevent violent extremism, we must also bear in mind that FoRB might not be the solution for all violent extremism. Thus, there is a need to tread on this path with caution. SAFFoRB in the coming months will explore more UN mechanisms- UPR, CEDAW, ICCPR. At the same time, SAFFoRB will strive at documentation and monitoring of FoRB. But SAFFoRB will not limit itself to these interventions but also develop practical strategies which help us become relevant in the region and expand the network.

We envisage SAFFoRB to be diverse and vibrant as a reflection of the region. SAFFoRB is committed to promoting youths and women in the forum. At the same time, SAFFoRB will continue to be a repository for skills and knowledge for FoRB and build capacities of civil society organizations on the issue of FoRB.