



**BANGLADESH 1992:
THIS IS OUR HOME**

Remains of a Family Home. One of 40,000 homes destroyed. 1992.

Sample Document of the Plight of our Hindu, Buddhist, Christian & Tribal Minorities in Our Islamized Homeland



Gandhian Abhoy Ashram of Nonviolence, Comilla, 1992 Pogrom



**Compiled and Edited by
Bidyut Sarker**



**Published by
Bangladesh Minority Hindu Buddhist Christian (and Tribal)
Unity Council of North America
(A Human Rights Protection Group)**



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Sample Document of the Plight of our Hindu, Buddhist, Christian &
Tribal Minorities in Our Islamized Homeland

POGROMS 1987-1992

Compiled and Edited by
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Bangladesh Minority Hindu Buddhist Christian [and Tribal]
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DEDICATION

*To all those who lost their lives, those who suffered, and
those who were forced to flee their beloved homeland.*

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

This volume is a collection of newspaper clippings, articles, and statements made by several members of Bangladesh Parliament and the U. S. Congress on minority persecution in Bangladesh. The primary purpose of this collection is to communicate to the world that a systematic persecution of the religious (Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian) and ethnic (tribals) minorities has been going on in Bangladesh since 1975, which has intensified at an alarming rate since 1988, when Islam was declared the state religion, doctoring the constitution.

Minority persecution in Bangladesh has become commonplace in recent years. The military governments of Bangladesh in the past had not only aided the Islamic fundamentalists carry out minority pogroms but also directly participated in the process. And, under the current democratic government, the situation has only worsened. The latest large scale minority pogrom eclipsed all the past ones. Between the 6th and 16th of December, 1992, 15 Hindu men women and children were killed, 2,600 women raped, 10,000 injured, 200,000 (two hundred thousand) people made homeless, 3,600 temples and places of worship razed, 40,000 minority houses destroyed, and tens of thousands of Hindu-owned businesses burned to the ground.

Minority persecution has become a semi-institutionalized process in Bangladesh. This is virtually a continuation of the policy of the Pakistani military junta who ruled Bangladesh until 1971. According the first constitution of the country, Bangladesh was a secular democracy, but following the assassination of the founder President of the country in 1975, the military dictators rehabilitated the previously discredited fundamentalist Islamic political parties into national politics. With the infusion of arms and cash from such militant Islamic countries as Libya, Saudi Arabia and Iran, these fundamentalist Islamic forces began to consolidate themselves and exert tremendous influence on the government. While they brutalized the minorities physically, the government, dispossessed them of their property by using the infamous "Vested Property Law", denied them justice, employment and business opportunities. Temples were desecrated and destroyed, women kidnapped, raped and killed, routinely. The process climaxed in 1988 when the government even abandoned the pretense of being secular and declared Islam as the state religion. This amendment of the constitution in effect "legitimized" minority persecution. Following the proclamation of Islam as the state religion, thousands of major historical places of worship and temples were razed, women raped and people pushed off their properties thus forcing them to leave the country.

This has continued, and the worst happened under the current democratically elected government of Begum Khaleda Zia, who appointed a war-criminal the President of the country. Between the 7 - 13 December, 1992, the fundamentalist Muslims, using the communal unrest in India as a ploy, mobilized in thousands in the mosques throughout the country, and then methodically desecrated and destroyed thousands of temples, looted and set fire to tens of thousands of Hindu-owned businesses and houses, raped Hindu women, severely injured many and killed 15. According to published reports, villages where Hindus are concentrated were burned to the ground one after another. In one such incident at Miresarai, the pogrom started at 11 P.M. and continued undeterred through 5 A.M. Rather than protecting the victims, the government had its student front, the *Jatiyatabadi Chatradal*, further terrorized the brutalized, fear-stricken, uprooted Hindus by firing upon the burning villages. Atrocities of similar magnitude occurred in such places such as Miresarai, Kurubdia, Maheshkhali, Bhola, Manikgonj, Chittagong, Sunamgonj, Sylhet, etc. As a result of the pogrom, in the district of Bhola alone 50,000 minorities became homeless.

Instead of preventing the pogrom or stopping the atrocities, the Prime Minister, Begum Khaleda Zia tried to suppress the entire incident. In her nationally televised speech, the Prime Minister loudly demanded that the razed Babri mosque in India be rebuilt immediately, but she failed to refer to the fact that thousands of temples--some of them older than the Babri Mosque-- were being destroyed in her own country as she was speaking. Rather, she congratulated the people for "maintaining communal harmony and peace", thus cleverly sending a clear and loud signal to the fundamentalists that it is o.k. to annihilate the ethnic and religious minorities of the country.

Although a handful of courageous reporters and some opposition Members of Parliament have vividly reported these disgraceful incidents and the progressive Muslim intellectuals of the country have both condemned the fundamentalists and accused the government of its inaction, this feeble protest is not enough to arrest the process. Over the past eighteen years, the government controlled media has suppressed the spirit of our liberation war and independence--secular democracy and non-

communal nationalism. This has turned the clock backward; Islamic fundamentalism is now threatening to wipe out the secular forces.

This ominous process is being accelerated by a group of Bengali intellectuals who present themselves as liberal humanists in the lecture circuit, but, in practice, promote Islamic nationalism. Time and time again in New York, for example, they have denied the fact that minorities of Bangladesh are being systematically persecuted thus blocking our efforts to raise public awareness about the issue. Similarly, whenever we have tried to present our problem to the international community they have invariably drowned our voice by shouting or by applying physical force. Yet another group of community leaders in New York, have always tried to diffuse the issue by saying that "the sporadic incidents of communal violence against the minorities of Bangladesh are due to decline in law and order situation". They are, however, interestingly, extremely vocal against every single incident of communal violence against the Muslims all over the world.

Joining the chorus, in the past, many Muslim leaders of the progressive political parties of Bangladesh often said: "The solution to the minority problem lies in the country's return to democracy", suggesting that there was no need for organizing the minorities of the country under the leadership of Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council to restore their civil rights. However, it should be reminded that the minority pogrom-1992 occurred when a democratic government was in power. During the pogrom-1992, the head of the so called democratic government, Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia not only did not acknowledge the minority pogrom of December 1992 but also refused to let Bangladesh Red Crescent supply emergency relief goods in the affected areas, thus ensuring that at least some of them die of starvation and exposure. She also denied journalists and other agencies with relief goods entry into those areas so that the civilized world may not learn about it. Consequently, many of the 200,000 victims of the pogrom are still living under the sky. This leaves us with no doubt about what the minorities of Bangladesh feel today, i.e., there exists a well thought out plan along the line of what is happening in the Islamic Republic of Sudan: "cleansing" the country of its ethnic and religious minorities. To take one example of how the fundamentalists and the government collaborate in the process, 600 tribal people were systematically murdered by the local Muslim settlers and the paramilitary forces at Logang in the district of Chittagong Hill Tracts, in April, 1992. And, of course, the 45,000 Buddhists who were driven out of Chittagong Hill tracts still remain refugees in Indian refugee camps, not to mention the hundreds of thousands of Hindus who have sought shelter in India, Canada, and the United States.

The civil and human rights of the ethnic and religious minorities of Bangladesh have systematically been violated for the past eighteen years, it continues under the current democratic government of Begum Khaleda Zia. They are not only being discriminated against in every sphere of social life, but also continually subjected to unprovoked communal violence involving murder, rape, arson, arrest on fictitious charges and the like which has forced them to leave the country in thousands. Today, the members of the minority communities are not allowed to withdraw their own savings from the banks in large sums. The Hindu women are even afraid of wearing their traditional dress. Thus, they live there like prisoners in their motherland.

The world does not know about it; because of the strict censorship under which the media work in Bangladesh, these incidents have remained largely unreported to the world. But for this genocide to stop--and it must stop-- the community of civilized nations must be made aware of it. Since neither the minorities nor the small group of progressive Muslims, who oppose minority persecution in the country, is strong enough to put up an effective resistance to the government-backed Islamic fundamentalist forces, only pressures from the world community may save the minorities of Bangladesh from extinction.

This miniscular attempt at communicating our plight to the civilized world would be amply rewarded if only one more person in the world feels that this mayhem has got to stop.

Compiled and edited by-
Bidyut Sarker
Secretary,
Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian (and Tribal)
Unity Council of North America, New York.

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Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

Washington, DC 20515

November 13, 1992

Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia
c/o Embassy of Bangladesh
2201 Wisconsin Avenue, Suite 300
Washington, D.C. 20007

Dear Madame Prime Minister:

We, Members of the United States House of Representatives, are writing to express our strong concern over reports of a massacre in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of your country.

According to reliable reports, on April 10, 1992, the town of Logong in the Chittagong Hill Tracts was surrounded by Bengali settlers accompanied by paramilitary forces. The inhabitants of the town were then systematically murdered. Military officials in Khagrachari admit to over 130 dead; estimates from Amnesty International and human rights organizations in Bangladesh range up to 600 or more. Eyewitnesses report that the entire village was burned to the ground.

We are shocked and upset by these reports, which suggest the killing of innocent victims on a tremendous scale. The continuing effort to subdue the people of the Chittagong Hill Tracts has been marked by repeated accusations that government security forces have violated the basic human rights of the inhabitants of that area. Reports of torture, rape, and extrajudicial execution have been common for several years.

Although we understand that your government is engaged in an ongoing conflict with the armed opposition group Shanti Bahini, rebellion can never be an excuse for murdering civilians, much less full-scale massacre. We call on your government to undertake an immediate, full, and impartial investigation into these reports, and to punish those responsible.

We are also concerned that these events are part of a larger pattern in your country of mistreatment of religious minorities. The establishment of Islam as the state religion continues to cause concern among Hindu, Christian, and Buddhist minorities; reports of attacks on religious minorities are common. Furthermore, several million Bangladeshi Buddhists remain refugees in India.

The time has come for the government of Bangladesh to take action in rectifying this situation, in line with its position as a constitutional democracy and a responsible member of the world community. Great changes have taken place in your country in the last two years, changes that are applauded by democracies throughout the world. Action on these issues will show your commitment to upholding international human- and civil-rights standards. We look forward to a response from your government to our concerns.

Sincerely,

THOMAS M. FOGLIETTA
Member of Congress

GARY L. ACKERMAN
Member of Congress

HENRY A. WAXMAN
Member of Congress

ELIOT L. ENGEL
Member of Congress

DANA ROHRBACHER
Member of Congress

BERNARD SANDERS
Member of Congress

CHRISTOPHER H. SMITH
Member of Congress

NANCY PELOSI
Member of Congress

EDOLPHUS TOWNS
Member of Congress

MIKE ESPY
Member of Congress

RICHARD H. STALLINGS
Member of Congress

FRANK PALLONE, Jr.
Member of Congress

PETER A. DeFAZIO
Member of Congress

AUSTIN J. MURPHY
Member of Congress

CONSTANCE A. MORELLA
Member of Congress

RONALD K. MACTLEY
Member of Congress

Bangladesh Votes for Muslim Rule

By MOHAN RAM

Special to India Abroad

NEW DELHI— Amid violent street protests, the Bangladesh National Assembly on June 7 voted to make the country an Islamic state. The opposition parties, which had boycotted the March Assembly elections, vowed to fight the step, which they regard as retrogressive.

Bangladesh, the world's largest Muslim-majority country, with a population of 104 million after Indonesia, 164 million, has been passing through an upheaval since November, with the major opposition parties demanding the resignation of President Hussain M Ershad.

Won 1986 Election

He seized power through a coup in 1982 and had tried to legitimize his rule with an election in 1986, which his newly-formed Jatiya Party won amid charges of massive rigging.

Gen. Ershad tried to blunt the movement that began in November by dissolving Parliament and calling fresh elections, but the two major opposition alliances said they would not participate in the voting unless the President stepped down first. The elections were marked by violence and a low voter turnout.

Opposition View

The opposition parties believe the decision to make Islam the state religion had no compelling reason except Ershad's anxiety to stay in office.

There has been a lull in the opposition campaign since the March elections, and the general has used it to push his Islamization plan to divide the people and divert the movement the opposition was trying to renew. The opposition's campaign aimed at restoration of democracy through a free and fair election, with the President stepping down first.

When Bangladesh came into being in 1971, secularism was one of the state principles. So the opposition sees in Islamization a conspiracy against the spirit of the liberation war.

Seceded on Bengali Issue

Bangladesh, known as East Pakistan until 1971, seceded from Pakistan but not

over religion. The issue was one of Bengali national identity.

Moves toward Islamization in pre-breakup (1971) Pakistan took the form of an assault on Bengali identity through measures like imposition of Urdu as the official language while the majority of Pakistan's population spoke Bengali.

The homogenous cultural nationalism of the Bengalis left little room for Islamization. For instance, the degree of women's participation in the professions and politics was remarkably high for a Muslim-majority country. Bengali cultural nationalism cut across religion. (Hindu, Buddhist and Christian minorities account for 10 percent of the Bangladesh population).

Why It Is Opposed

The opposition to the Islamization of



Student activists, supporting the opposition-led strike against the controversial Islamic bill, damaged a vehicle near Dhaka University campus last week. (Photo: UNN)

Bangladesh is for these reasons:

- The Parliament that enacted the Islamization measure is illegal and therefore cannot amend the 1973 Constitution.
- Bangladesh has been a unique example of religious harmony and Islamization would lead to religious conflict.
- The move is a manipulation of Ershad's "West Asian mentors" in a nation known for its secular past.

The immediate domestic implications of the measure are ominous. It would divide the Movement for the Restoration

of Democracy because Ershad's appeal now is to religion in a milieu of religious fundamentalism all around.

Women's Rights Issue

The equal rights enjoyed by women may be the biggest casualty. Islam as the state religion would automatically render the religious minorities second-class citizens and expose them to discrimination.

In theory, India should have no reason to be concerned over what technically is an internal matter of Bangladesh. Pakistan has become an Islamic state and even the Communist-ruled Afghanistan has proclaimed itself an Islamic country.

But it has far-reaching implications for India. India helped the emergence of Bangladesh after 10 million Bengalis fled to India to escape Pakistan terror. Three

million Bengalis died in the 1971 turmoil and several hundred Indian soldiers were killed in the war.

Until 1971, India had largely received Hindu refugees from East Pakistan fleeing the oppression of a Muslim-majority regime. But those who came in 1971 during the upheaval were both Hindus and Muslims. In theory, every refugee who came after March 1971 is supposed to have been sent back.

If the Buddhist Chakmas of the Chitragong Hill Tracts district are treated as a category apart, the influx into India's Assam, Meghalaya, West Bengal and Tripura states is an illegal one. This is the spillover of Bangladesh's poverty into India in the form of illicit immigrants in search of better economic opportunity.

An Islamic Bangladesh might result in a new tide of Hindu refugees into India. Flight from religious persecution ceased to be a phenomenon after 1971. Over a time India might have to reckon with the flight of religious minorities from Bangladesh even while it is thinking of erecting a fence around the 17-year-old nation.

Second, India will be facing an Islamic state on the East in addition to Pakistan on the West. Islamization in Bangladesh

By ELA DUTT

WASHINGTON — A Buddhist monk from the Chittagong hill tracts condemned the government of Bangladesh for what he called continuing human rights violations. At a meeting held here last week the monk, Bhikkhu Bimal Tishya, who is persona non grata in Bangladesh for his outspoken statements, said Dhaka was misusing aid from its largest donors, such as the United States and Japan, and diverting funds to the military and paramilitary forces.

Bimal Bhikkhu, who was on a tour of the U.S. and was to meet with State Department officials, the Congressional Human Rights Caucus, Amnesty International and Asia Watch, cited alleged violations by Bangladesh security forces this year, including one last April 10, when a cluster village called Logang was reported burned to the ground and 1,200 people killed. Accounts of this were given by the London-based International Work Group on Indigenous Affairs, Anti-Slavery International, Survival International and Amnesty International.

The Chittagong hill tracts are inhabited largely by Chakma and other Tibet-Burma hill tribes, 80 percent of whom are Theravada Buddhists, and relations between the tribespeople and

the Bengali plains inhabitants, which were already strained, were further aggravated by Dhaka's policy of settling Bengalis in the hills. After Bangladesh won independence in 1971, a section of the Chakmas formed the Shanti Bahini (peace force) to counter what they said were atrocities committed by Mujib Bahini forces.

Had Become Refugees

Bhikkhu Bimal Tishya asserted that 60,000 Chakmas had become refugees in India's Tripura state and live in sub-human conditions. He said 100,000 more live near the Chinese border in Arunachal Pradesh. The monk runs an elementary school and training center for Chakma refugees near Calcutta.

In the 1960s the big Kaptai hydroelectric dam, built with assistance from the United States, displaced 100,000 tribespeople and flooded 40 percent of their land, the monk said.

He has addressed meetings in Burlington, Vermont; Boston and New York. Also in New York he was to meet with the chairman of the United Nations Human Rights Commission to protest the agreement between India and Bangladesh that the Chakma refugees be sent back. He insisted that some form of guarantee of life and property must be assured for returning refugees.

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October 30, 1992

INDIA ABROAD

Page 8, News India, May 27, 1988

Protest In Bangla Desh

From News Dispatches.

DHAKA: The United Council of Hindu, Buddhist and Christian communities has held a rally in the capital urging the Government to refrain from making Islam as the State religion of Bangladesh.

Presided over by Major General (Retd) Chittaranjan Dutta, a leading member of the Hindu community, the meeting voiced its strong protest against a constitution amendment bill in Parliament on May 11 which among others seeks to make Islam the State religion.

Boudhi Pal Mahathero and

Prof. Gabriel Manik Gomej also spoke at the rally on behalf of the Buddhist and Christian communities.

A memorandum demanding the withdrawal of the bill was read out at the rally and was later handed over to the Speaker of the Jatiya Sangsad (National Parliament), Shamsul Huda Chowdhury.

In its memorandum, the council recalled the genesis of Bangladesh and said the liberation of the country was achieved on December 16, 1971 through the united sacrifices of the people belonging to Muslim, Hindu, Christian and Buddhist communities.

It said making Islam the State religion would be contrary to the spirit and values of the nation's liberation war.

Unnatural Disasters

Pogroms have killed thousands of Bangladeshi minorities; millions more are refugees in India.

By G.R. Chowdhury

In the West, Bangladesh is a synonym for poverty, a basket-case nation with a soaring population, a pitiful economy, and a plague of natural disasters. Less well known is that the country's minorities have long waged one of the world's most difficult and serious struggles for survival. Successive military- and government-sponsored pogroms have killed thousands of minority Bangladeshis outright, while the fortunate ones have become refugees in India.

In perhaps the most dramatic instance, the Pakistan army killed three million people in nine months during the course of Bangladesh's 1971 war of independence. Ten million refugees took shelter in India. Most victims were members of the Hindu minority.

Today, attacks on minorities and their cultures in Bangladesh take many forms. Minorities are the victims of government-sponsored pogroms and riots as well as of a ban on the hiring of minorities. Moreover, they suffer police, military, and judicial inaction in the face of individual and Muslim-sponsored terror, discrimination, and repression.

A particularly glaring case is the Enemy Property Act, initially passed in 1949, then renamed in 1965 and 1972. Under this law the government can confiscate minority properties and businesses with no compensation or notice simply by declaring a person to be an enemy of the state. Between 1975 and 1989, the Bangladesh government confiscated 1.5 million acres of land from the nation's minorities, in addition to homes, fishing ponds, shops, and businesses. A November 1991 report indicates that 60 percent of minority property may have already been confiscated.

ROOTS OF VIOLENCE

Though born as a country only 20 years ago, Bangladesh is an ancient land with a long history. Together with the present-day Indian state of West Bengal, ancient Indian scriptures refer to it as Banga desh (land). Banga, which the English called Bengal, covers the world's largest delta, that of the rivers of Ganga and Brahmaputra.

For millennia, the Bengali area of the Indian subcontinent has had a mixture of religious, linguistic, and ethnic groups. In Bangladesh, today's minorities are Hindus, Buddhists, and Christians, as well as plains and hill tribal peoples and speakers of various tribal and Urdu languages. The fate of all these groups has come to be linked to that of Hindu Bengalis, who constitute more than 95 percent of the minorities.

The Muslim presence dates at least from the fourteenth century, when non-native Muslim kings—Pathans and Mughals—became rulers of Bengal. However, Bengalis had started embracing Islam even before then, and Muslim rule expedited that process. In the seventeenth century, Muslim power declined throughout India as British power rose, but relations among Hindu, Muslims, and Buddhists remained relatively peaceful.

Two hundred years of British rule dramatically changed the relations between Bengal's Hindus and Muslims. An early British action that may mark the first distancing of Hindus from Muslims was the Permanent Settlement Act. This 1792 law vested Bengal's tax collection in the hands of the overwhelmingly Hindu gentry

at a time when most peasants were Muslim. (Muslim rulers also depended on this Hindu gentry for governing Bengal.)

More concretely, religion-based politics in Bangladesh—known in the region as "communalism"—originated in Britain's partitioning of Bengal in 1905 on the basis of religion. Western Bengal, with a Hindu majority, formed one province, and Muslim East Bengal another. The British claimed the area was too large to administer as one unit, but mostly Hindu nationalists accused the British of a divide-and-rule policy that injected religion into Indian politics. The English exacerbated the tensions by granting several benefits to Muslim elites at the cost of the Hindu middle-class. After much agitation, in particular from the nationalists, Britain reunited Bengal in 1912, but communal politics remained a permanent feature there, as in all India.

Still, a precarious balance existed in Bengal until the late 1940s. In 1946, on the eve of Indian independence and the partition of India into India and Pakistan, a ghastly pogrom, supported by the ruling Muslim League administration in Bengal, occurred against poor, rural Hindus in the eastern Noakhali district. Estimates of the number of Hindus murdered varies, from a government figure of 1,000 to unofficial figures of tens of thousands. This killing created the term "Noakhali danga" (Noakhali Riot), and it set the stage for the future of minorities in Bangladesh.

Mahatma Gandhi intervened to stop the Noakhali carnage, but after Pakistan came into being there was no Mahatma to stop the killing of Hindu and other minorities. Anti-Hindu pogroms in East Pakistan took place in 1947, 1949, 1951, 1952, 1954, 1956, 1964, and 1971. Pakistan's military-bureaucratic rulers routinely used anti-Hindu riots and anti-India slogans to slow the growth of Bengali nationalism.

In 1964, at the height of the Bengali

G.R. CHOWDHURY, who was born in Bangladesh, was imprisoned for his participation in the nationalist movement. He now lives in the United States.



In Dhaka, the temple of the god Sani and adjoining buildings were burned in 1990.

nationalist movement, Pakistan unleashed a reign of terror. Estimates of number of Hindus murdered varies from 10,000 to several times that. Newspapers in India reported this event extensively, but those in Pakistan only noted that even Muslims were killed trying to save Hindu neighbors. The *New York Times* failed to cover the tragedy, although the *Washington Post* and *London Times* reported that over 1,000 were killed in the first days of the killing, including a U.S. priest.

Then came the 1971 independence war during which Pakistan targeted Hindu and other minorities, affecting the homes and businesses of almost all Hindu families. Over 70 percent of those killed and those who became refugees were Hindu and other minorities. Bengali police and the Pakistani army frequently stopped men, stripped them naked to check whether they were circumcised or not, and asked them to recite from the Koran. Non-Muslim women were practically barred from wearing anything that would identify them as such, since their identification as anything but Muslim could mean instant death. Many books cover this subject, almost all in Bengali; *Bhayabaha Aviggata* (Terrifying Experience) covers over 50 instances in which the Pakistan army and its collaborators murdered Hindus and Muslims. In one case, soldiers shot to death 338 Hindus at Syedpur in North Bengal after loading them in railway box cars.

POGROMS, KILLINGS, AND OFFICIAL DISCRIMINATION

In Bangladesh, I have often asked people, "How are minorities doing?" For many years, the same answers came over and over—in villages and cities, from rich and poor, from Muslims and Hindus, Christians, and Buddhists: "Barely surviving." "Back against the wall." "On our way to destruction." "We will not be able to maintain our identity." Until a few years ago, I also heard, "A lot better than before Pakistani rule." Recently, however, people say, "Even Pakistani days were better than now."

This is saddening and sobering. For a few years after independence, large-scale killing of minorities disappeared. It even seemed that the majority-minority, Muslim-non-Muslim communalism might end. After all, minorities had paid a heavy price for Bangladesh's independence.

However, minorities soon started to feel pressure for several reasons, including the decision of Bangladesh's first Prime Minister Mujibur Rahman to issue a blanket pardon of murderers after independence. In addition, Rahman, who was considered tolerant and secular, retained the Enemy Property Act, and he refused to allow the repair of the Ramna Kali temple in Dhaka city after its desecration and burning by the Pakistan army. Rahman also gave a famous speech in the Chitagong Hills in which he asked the hill tribal peoples to give up their

Two hundred years of British rule dramatically changed the relatively peaceful relations between Bengal's Hindus and Muslims.

identity and become Bengalis.

Attacks on minorities and their festivities started to become routine, and after Rahman's assassination, official anti-Hindu acts intensified. Minorities could no longer get government or semi-government jobs—such as with the police, the military, or the bureaucracy—even though Bangladesh's minorities are relatively well educated (*see table below*). Minorities complain that after passing civil-service tests they are dropped from consideration once their identity becomes known. They are also barred from overseas assignments at Bangladeshi embassies or the United Nations.

Of this situation, Matiur Rahman and Syed Azizul Haq, two well-known Muslim intellectuals of Bangladesh,

Minority Hiring in Bangladesh

Administration (officers)	5%
Administration (lower rank)	3-5%
Administration (secretaries)	0%
Customs and excise	0%
Income-tax officials	1.5%
Military officers	1.5%
Military soldiers	0%
Border security	0%
Police, officers	6%
Police rank and file	2.5%
Major bank managers	0%
Embassy & consulate staff	0%
Foreign assignments	0%
Home Ministry	0%
Judiciary	0%
Ministry of Defense	0%
Industry managers	1%
Industrial laborers	3-4%
Recent bank loans	<1%

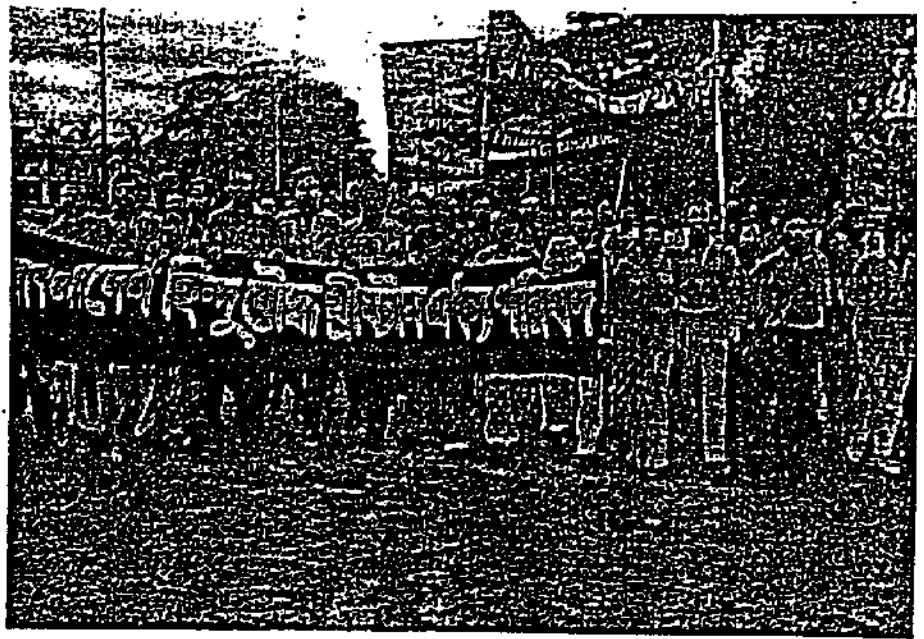
have written:

Even though there's no legal restriction on hiring [Hindu] minorities at higher levels, in reality we find there's neither a Hindu Secretary nor an Additional Secretary. There's only one at the [next lower] level of Joint Secretary and only a few Deputy Secretaries. They don't expect any promotion.

At this moment there are only six Hindu District Commissioners [out of sixty-four]. Although Hindus may be appointed in the police at the lower level, it will be hard to find [them] at the Police Super level. There are none at the foreign service. Judiciary has a similar picture. There's only one judge at the High Court level. In the Bangladesh Army, there are only six Hindu commissioned officers. The highest ranking officer is a colonel, and rest are majors.

Organized attacks on minorities and their temples, viharas, ashrams, and churches also increased many-fold in the last half of 1980s, with large-scale attacks in 1987, 1989, and 1990. In 1989, over 400 temples were destroyed or damaged. This wave reached its height with the destruction or desecration of perhaps 80 percent of Bangladesh's Hindu-Buddhist temples and the devastation of thousands of Hindu homes and businesses between October 30 and November 1, 1990. *The Disgrace*, edited by Debasish Nandi in Bangladesh, lists 150

*In one case
in the 1971
independence war,
Pakistani soldiers
shot to death 338
Hindus after
loading them in
railway box cars.*



After the carnage of November 1990, the Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council marched with Muslim support.

temples totally or partially destroyed or desecrated in the city of Chittagong alone. In February 1991, the Bangladeshi journal *Parishad Barta* listed thousands of temples, churches, homes, and businesses destroyed between October 30 and November 1, 1991. It also listed Christian churches, schools, hospitals, and homes attacked in January and February 1991 at the beginning of the Gulf War. *Anjali*, a book published in Dhaka in 1991, lists another several hundred temples destroyed, damaged, or desecrated.

(Barbara Crosette, a *New York Times* reporter, wrote a glowing report on minority security soon after the November 1989 events. Again, in March 1991, she visited Bangladesh and wrote a similar story, in essence supporting the pogroms while temples, homes, and businesses were still smoldering.)

BANGLADESH TODAY

Bangladeshi minorities have begun organizing themselves under various banners to protect their human rights and document many of these atrocities. There are committees organized to push for the repeal of the Enemy Property Act, to organize Puja festivals, to protect against settling Muslims in tribal lands, and to protect Christian and Buddhist institutions.

The most important among these groups is a non-party organization,

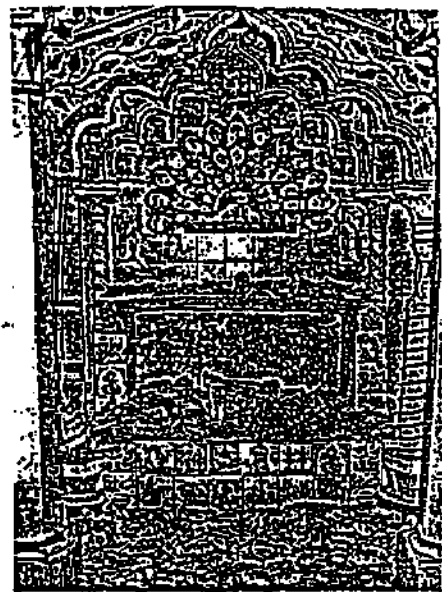
the Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council. Headquartered in Dhaka, with branches all over the country, the council has highlighted the destruction of churches and temples and the forced eviction of minorities to India. It has also brought attention to the abduction, rape, and forced conversion to Islam of women. In parts of Bangladesh, fear of this has made many minority families reluctant to send their daughters to college unmarried. The Unity Council documents such offenses in its journal, *Parishad Barta*, but more important than the absolute number of incidents is the fear that has gripped the minority community. As a result, fewer girls may be going to college, despite a long tradition of higher education among Hindu and Christian girls in Bangladesh.

Besides the Unity Council, a Bangladesh Women's Organization and a Bangladesh Human Rights and Legal Institute have been formed in Dhaka. Other important organizations include the Chittagong Hill Tracts Peoples Action Committee and several local Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, and tribal organizations that protect the rights of each group on a local level.

The task of these organizations is immense. The plight of Bangladesh's minorities can be summarized in a news report that appeared in September 1989 about a dirt-poor Hindu of the Nadirabad village in eastern

Bangladesh. In 1987, Mrs. Birajbala Debnath's husband was kidnapped and cut to pieces when he refused to give up his tiny homestead free of charge to a Muslim and migrate to India. A Muslim boatman, Abdus Shahid, described what happened next to Mrs. Debnath and her five children: *I had my boat docked at the Nadirabad village. It was in the middle of the night, around 1 a.m. All of a sudden, I saw a group of 15 to 20 people force Mrs. Birajbala and her five children [into my boat]. They were scared to death. They couldn't even cry. Some had their clothes on, others didn't. The kidnappers asked me to row the boat. I got scared, too. The boat arrived at the Dhopajhuri Bill [river bank]. [The kidnappers] had already brought drums [empty oil*

barrels], salt, and lime. The killers unloaded [the family] at the edge of the bank. I remained at my boat. All of a sudden, I saw that they were about to slaughter Mrs. Birajbala. She cried at the top of her voice. She was begging again and again by clutching the legs of the killers. The killers then cut her into pieces and stuffed her into a drum. After that, they cut into pieces the elder daughter. From a distance, I watched the younger children begging for their lives over and over again. [They were also murdered.] I can't express that in words. Tears came out of my eyes. I called for God: Oh Allah, why did you bring me here? I was feeling dizzy. There was nothing that could be done. The killers buried both the drums in the river bed and



The 16th-century Dhakaswari temple of the goddess of Dhaka was completely destroyed in November 1990.

BANGLADESH'S REFUGEES

Bangladesh's minority population has declined drastically since the 1947 partition of India (*see table*). Where have these people gone? All have headed to India. The 1946 Noakhali riot made it clear that Pakistan wouldn't protect minority life and property. Thus, the riot marks the start of Hindu migration to West Bengal and Tripura in India, which remained secular after partition, as well as a general diaspora of Bangladeshi Hindus, Buddhists, Christians, and tribal groups. Tripura is now 70 percent Bengali refugee, including the state's chief minister, a member of the Congress Party, and his Communist predecessor. A third of West Bengal's 67 million people are of Bangladeshi origin, including the chief minister, a member of the Communist Party, and his Congress predecessor.

Estimates of the total number of Bangladeshi-origin Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, and tribals in India vary between 26 million and 38 million. Bangladeshi Buddhist refugees make up the second largest ethnic group in Arunachal and Mizoram states. Refugees make up the largest group in the Andaman Islands, the central Indian Dandakaranya Forest area, and parts of the Indian states of Bihar, Assam, Meghalaya, Orissa.

Over 50,000 Chakma refugees—Bangladeshi Buddhist tribals from the Chittagong Hills—have been camped in the Tripura State of India for several years. Despite their decade-long armed autonomy movement, these tribal peoples continue to be displaced from their homeland. In 1947, at the time of partition, the Chittagong Hill Tracts were almost 100 percent non-Muslim, but by 1981 Muslims were over 40 percent of the population in its Bandarban district and over one-third in the rest of the area.

In the wake of 1964's reign of terror alone, over 1.1 million refugees went to India. According to government statistics, the number of Bangladeshi refugees going to India each year varied from about 4,000 to a high of over 660,000 in 1964. However, not all refugees register with the Indian government to be counted in statistics.

Not surprisingly, this vast wave of refugees has led to a backlash, and anti-Bengali, anti-refugee incidents have occurred in Assam and Tripura.

Minorities in Bangladesh

Year	Total Population	Minorities
1941	41,997,297	29.3%
1951	44,165,750	23.1%
1961	55,222,663	19.6%
1974	76,389,000	14.3%
1981	89,921,000	13.3%

asked me to row the boat.

While several organizations expressed their outrage at these gruesome murders, protests have done nothing to stem nationwide attacks on minorities. And one of the first things that the newly elected government of Khaleda Zia discussed in April 1991 was whether minorities should be allowed to vote for the Muslim majority or not, potentially creating a separate electorate. In the summer of 1991, two low-caste Hindu villages in the Kotalipara area were burned to the ground on the basis of a false rumor. No one has been prosecuted. Unless the world takes note of their plight, Bangladesh's minorities and their cultures will follow either the path of Mrs. Birajbala or that of million of refugees in India.

Organized attacks on minorities and temples, ashrams and churches increased manyfold in the last half of the 1980s.

THE DISGRACE : INSTALMENT ONE

Summary of an essay by Motiur Rahman and Syed Azizul Huq.

The title of this essay is 'Victims of Discrimination : the Hindu Community in Bangladesh'. This happens to be the summary of a book by these authors, which bears the same title.

During the period of Pakistani rule, functionaries at the highest administrative levels preached hostility towards Hindus. Authorities stirred up largescale communal riots on three occasions in furtherance of political aims. Following the 1950 riots, as pointed out by Ghulam Kabir, the author of *Minority Politics in Pakistan*, ten lakh Hindus left East Pakistan. Hindus formed 33% of the population at this territory in 1901, 31.5% in 1911, 30.6% in 1921, 24.4% in 1931, and 28% in 1941. But, in 1951, Hindus constituted only 22% of the total population of East Pakistan. In 1961, this figure dwindled to 18.5%.

In independent Bangladesh, Hindus constituted 13.5% of the population in 1974, 12.1% in 1981. Hindus, however, dispute these official estimates, and point out that the Government deliberately underestimates the Hindu population. Hindus claim that they form 20% of the total population.

Hindus extended largescale support to the Awami League, when it acted as the vanguard of the independence movement in Bangladesh. Sacrifices by Muslims, Hindus,

Buddhists and Christians ensured the success of the 1971 freedom struggle. Non-Muslims felt elated when the 1972 Constitution enshrined secularism as one of its fundamental principles. But minorities got disillusioned when the Enemy Property Act of Pakistani days was renamed as the Vested Property Act, causing untold misery to members of minority communities.

Still, during 1972-73, the state did not overthrow formally the principle of secularism. But the military regime of Ziaur Rahman left no uncertainty about the fact that, as in the days of Pakistan, persecution of minorities would form a bedrock of state policy in Bangladesh. Zia removed 'secularism' from the Constitution, and served a notice on minorities that the state did not welcome their presence.

Husein Muhammad Ershad went another step forward in making the oppression of minorities an instrument of state policy. Ershad declared Islam to be the state religion, making this declaration a part of the Constitution.

Hindus are now struck by the excruciating fear that they have been reduced to second class citizens. They complain of discrimination and persecution in a number of ways.

Numerous Hindu temples have suffered from serious attacks. Reports of these attacks, even when they reach newspapers, are not published. The Pakistan army completely