



Religious Persecution / Religion-Based

Violence in Bangladesh



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Country's Information



Bangladesh (Photo: Asia Pacific Curriculum)

Bangladesh

Bangladesh, officially the People's Republic of Bangladesh, is a country located in South Asia. With a population of over 163.1 million (DESA, 2019), Bangladesh is the eighth most populous country in the world (Visual Capitalist, 2020). Dhaka is the capital and the largest city of Bangladesh, as well as the economic, cultural, and political centre of the country. The political system of Bangladesh is a parliamentary democracy, with the Constitution providing the Parliament and the Prime Minister with substantial powers. Sheikh Hasina is the current Prime Minister after winning her third consecutive term. However, the country still faces accusations of constant irregularities in its electoral process.

In Bangladesh, over 98 percent of the population are Bengali, and the remaining two percent are identified as Indigenous ethnic groups and migrants. Approximately 89 percent of the population is Muslim, while ten percent are Hindu. The remainder of the religious citizens are constituted by Christians and Buddhists. Islam remains the State religion since 1988, despite the ruling of the Supreme Court which reaffirmed that the State should be secular (Hashmi and Arshi, 2011). The official language of Bangladesh is Bengali, however, there are five other regional languages, and over 30 languages are spoken in the country.

The country has long been known for its extreme poverty. A significant part of the inhabitants are small farmers, who struggle to make a living with small plots of land. Many of the workers in urban areas earn just a few cents a day. In the garment industry, one of the most important industries for the national economy, workers make approximately \$132 a month, with no guarantee of a minimum wage (ABC News, 2019). According to the World Bank, among the labour-force population in urban areas, 28 percent of the women and 19 percent of the men are illiterate (World Bank, 2018). This states the difficulty of access to work for women.

In addition, the country faces the challenges of the Rohingya refugee crisis, the disastrous consequences of climate change, the gender violence, child marriage, the criminalization of homosexuality, and religious

conflicts. Since August 2017, Bangladesh has been hosting more than 700,000 Rohingya refugees who fled from Myanmar (UNHCR, 2021). Nevertheless, the Rohingyas continue to face discrimination in Bangladesh. They are not allowed to work or move freely and thus, face economic inequality and security issues (Centre for Global Development, 2021).

Journalists and activists in Bangladesh also frequently face physical attacks or imprisonment for reporting material that is often found to be 'false' or 'defamatory' (GOV.UK, 2021). Besides, enforced disappearances, unlawful or arbitrary killings, including extrajudicial killings by the government or its agents are significant violations in the country.

History

Bangladesh has been officially considered an independent country since 1972. With India's partition in 1947, the region where the Bengali population lived changed from India's "State of West Bengal" to one of five provinces of Pakistan — the Pakistani province of "East Bengal" (Department of Economics, SOAS, University of London 2010)¹. On the night of March 25th, 1971, the West Pakistani military launched a military crackdown, known as the Operation Searchlight², against East Pakistan, killing around 7,000 innocent Bengali people in one night and instigating the nine-month Liberation War of Bangladesh (The Daily Star, 2021). Bangladesh gained independence on December 16th, 1971.

In 1972, Bangladesh's Constitution³ was drafted and adopted, leading to the formation of a parliamentary government. The Constitution expressed that the State should be governed by a Prime Minister as the Head of government and a President as the head of State, both elected by the National Assembly. However, in 1975, after the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman⁴ by the military, the country was under a military dictatorship until 1991. However, the parliamentary system was restored in 1991. Nevertheless, the civil-military relationship in Bangladesh remains complicated, with the armed forces still playing an essential role in national politics (APSA, 2013).

1. Later renamed East Pakistan

2. On the night of March 25th, 1971, the Pakistani government launched a violent operation called "Operation Searchlight" to end the rising Bengalis rebellion for independence. The operation was established by the former President General Yahya Khan and by the PPP (Pakistan People's Party) leader, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. (Shalini Sahay, 2021)

3. The constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh: <http://bdlaws.minlaw.gov.bd/act-367.html>.

4. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was perceived as the "Father of the Nation, and was the first President of Bangladesh.

Introduction

Bangladesh has been struggling with communal and religious-based violence since its independence from Pakistan in 1971. However, with the rise of radical Muslim groups and religious fanatics, this has been a growing issue in Bangladeshi society, with constant deaths, disappearances, conflicts, and violence. Islam is designated as the official State religion, and although the principle of secularism is also constitutionally defended, most religious minority leaders have stated that the government remains ineffective in protecting the rights of those religious minorities, who are often also ethnic minorities (U.S. Department of State, n.d.).

Besides the Muslim majority, the country is constituted by Hindus, Christians, Theravada-Hinayana Buddhists, Shia Muslims, Ahmadi Muslims, Baha'is, animists, agnostics, and atheists. For example, most Buddhists are part of Indigenous, non Bengali, communities at the Chittagong Hill Tracts. On the other hand, Christian communities are concentrated in different areas throughout the country, such as Barishal City, Dhaka City, Gazipur and Khulna (U.S. Department of State, n.d.).

The minority religious groups in Bangladesh continue to face silence from radical groups, persecution and violence. Communal violence fueled by hatred, prejudice and fake news were some of the most prominent issues faced by Bengali Hindus in particular. The main kinds of religious-based violence consist of kidnapping, forceful conversion, eviction from home, extrajudicial killings and violence against women.

The persecution of religious minority groups is exemplified by the events of October 2021, marked by several cases of violence motivated by religious radicalism. These cases of violence erupted after an alleged incident of blasphemy at the Durga Puja festival in Comilla, in October 2021. The Durga Puja is a six-day Hindu festival that happens every year to pay homage to the Hindu goddess Durga. After the emergence of footage of a Quran being placed on the knee of a Hindu God during this Durga Puja festivity, Muslim demonstrations broke out all over the country and violent protests started on October 13, 2021. As tensions grew, incidents of vandalism of Hindu temples were reported in Hajiganj in Chandpur District, Chattogram's Banshkhali and Cox's Bazar's Pekua. On October 14, 2021, tensions rose to a higher level when the ISKCON temple was attacked and vandalised, leading to the murder of a Hindu devotee in Noakhali. This attack caused the Hindu community to be shocked and concerned about recent violent events, leading them to organise several demonstrations in response to these attacks (Indian Express, 2021).

On October 15, 2021, there were sporadic attacks and vandalism, but most of the demonstrations were dispersed by the police. On the other hand, on the 16th, almost 10,000 Muslim protestors were seen in front of the capital's main mosque, the same spot chosen for the Friday demonstrations. According to Deutsche Welle, there were many banners of Islamist political parties at the protest. The crowd chanted intolerant phrases such as "Down with the enemies of the Islam" and "Hang the culprits" (DW, 2021). On October 15 and 16, there were separate protests from both Muslim and Hindu protestants.

Also on October 16, 2020, several Hindu temples and Hindu-owned shops were attacked, vandalised and robbed in Feni, about 157km from Dhaka, the country's capital. This occurred after an attack on a Hindu demonstration that was protesting against the violence during the Durga Puja. According to The Hindu, this

clash left at least 40 people injured (The Hindu, 2021).

On the 17th of October, two villages in Rangpur were the centre for extreme violence and vandalism. According to BD NEWS, at least 20 homes owned by Hindu people were burnt down along with a local Hindu temple in Majhipara-Bottala and Hatibandha villages in Pirganj Upazila of the northern district. The attack was motivated by an allegation of blasphemy posted on Facebook by a young hindu. Many people were injured but the young hindu and his close relatives were able to escape from the violence. Basanti Rani, on the other hand, was one of the hindus who had their home damaged by the fire, and said to BD NEWS: “I don't even have a bit of rice left. I had to eat a little puffed and flattened rice. Even if rice arrives in the area, who's going to get it for me? What will we eat?” (BD NEWS, 2021). On October 18, the country experienced the worst cases of communal clash. In the cities of Chittagong and Comilla, there were six deaths during the clash, four among attackers and two among Hindu devotees.

The Bangladesh Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, guaranteed to bring justice and protect the Hindu community. According to The Indian Express, the Prime Minister said they are already investigating those responsible for the attack. “They will be hunted down and punished”, said the Prime Minister (INDIAN EXPRESS, 2021). Nevertheless, the important point is that social media and the digital space have a particular role in spreading disinformation and fake news in such communal attacks. Bangladesh has become a fertile land for disinformation-led violence against religious minorities.

Historical overview

Since its foundation, Bangladesh has been characterised by the collision between religious secularism and particularism (Chaney & Sahoo, 2020). Before substantiating this statement, it is worth clarifying the meaning associated with these two concepts in the specific context of Bangladesh. Whereas in the European and American doctrines, the term 'secularism' signifies the privatisation of religion and its consequential exclusion from political life. In Bangladesh, secularism mainly means the mere coexistence of different religions within the same territory (Chaney & Sahoo, 2020). Conversely, as far as religious particularism is concerned, there is no difference in the interpretation of such concepts between Bangladesh and other realities worldwide. Therefore, religious particularism generally points out the undisputed belief in the exclusive authenticity of one determined religion, which often leads to intolerance and violence against people embracing other faiths (Chaney & Sahoo, 2020).

In 1971, the Bengali-speaking Muslims inhabiting East Pakistan triggered a revolt against the Urdu-speaking Muslims living in West Pakistan. The end of the conflict marked the birth of the new nation of Bangladesh, whose ethno-linguistic nationalism soon flowed into religious Islamic nationalism (Karim, 2005). Despite the Government's initial intention to preserve religious neutrality and secularism in the new-born nation during its first years of independence, pressure from Muslim elites never ceased and the situation remained unstable. Furthermore, the influence exercised by rich Islamic countries -such United Arab Emirates, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia- who providing Bangladesh with economic aid, meant that state secularism and the prohibition of religious-based political parties started faltering, paving the way to the inauguration of a sort of “multi-theocracy” under the founding leader's Mujibur Rahman's government (Datta, 2002). From the mid-1970s onwards, Bangladesh registered a gradual but steady mainstreaming of the Islamic religion within domestic policies and constitutional principles (Siddiqi, 2006). Against this backdrop, in 1977, the government of General Ziaur Rahman introduced a new Constitution, whose accentuated emphasis on the Islamic legacy of the country cast a shadow on the principle of secularism (Chaney & Sahoo, 2020). Moving forward along this trajectory, under General Ershad's mandate the Constitution was further amended: the new version contemplated Islam as the official religion of the State (Chaney & Sahoo, 2020).

During 1990s, the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party became the two predominant political parties of the country, and their narratives about the centrality to recognize the Islamic religion in the public life of the nation unleashed a new blow to the few remaining signs of state secularism (Chaney & Sahoo, 2020). Notwithstanding this recent religious-based reality within the country, Bangladesh had not yet witnessed many episodes of communal violence driven by faith. The situation started worsening as a reaction to the stiff religious tensions taking place in India, especially the Ayodhya incident of 1992 in which a crowd of Hindu activists attacked and destroyed the ancient Babri Mosque situated in the region of Uttar Pradesh (Chaney & Sahoo, 2020). In the aftermath of such violent attacks occurring in neighbouring India, Bangladesh began to

experience large-scale attacks directed against Hindu communities for the first time (Datta, 2002).

Ever since, religious persecutions have been one of the most appalling issues plaguing Bangladesh. The so-called Madrassa education, religious educational institutions contributing to the process of socialisation of people into the Islamic principles of life, has at times reinvigorated the recent trend of ultra-radicalisation of youngsters, even if the correlation between the two phenomena should not be generalised and oversimplified. (Chaney & Sahoo, 2020). Furthermore, some of the largest political parties operating within the public space of the country have continuously incentivised the Islamization of Bangladesh, as they have continued to overtly provide extremist and terrorist groups with support, rather than stigmatizing and opposing their atrocities endangering national security (Chaney & Sahoo, 2020).

However, despite this ever-growing phenomenon of placing Islam at the heart of Bangladesh's identity, the Fifteenth Amendment of the Constitution, adopted in 2011, represents a well-intentioned attempt to restore a peaceful coexistence amongst the wide spectrum of different faiths present on the territory. On the one hand, this provision confirmed Islam as the State religion of the Republic of Bangladesh, whilst establishing on the other hand that the practice of other religions shall be also guaranteed in an atmosphere of peace and harmony (Government of Bangladesh, 2011). This reference to the constitutional recognition of free worshipping paves the way to the topic of the following chapter, namely the Bangladeshi legal framework as to freedom of religion and its limitations.

Legal framework and the ambiguous formula of “hurting religious sentiment”

4.1 International legal framework

Freedom of religion is acknowledged by the main international human rights documents and it is nowadays peacefully considered to be an essential element for the correct functioning of any democratic society. The choice regarding which faith to embrace, which obviously includes the choice of being atheist or agnostic, shall always refer exclusively to the spiritual and intimate sphere of each person and, as such, these matters should be preserved from the pressures stemming from the State and its institutions. Improper external influences on people's religious freedom may result to be highly detrimental to the full and independent personal development of individuals.

Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) provides that everyone has the rights to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; therefore, everyone can change their faith and manifest their beliefs either alone or with others, and in private or in public, when it comes to teaching, practice, worship and observance (UNGA, 1948). Although the Article does not venture the duty to establish a laic State, it sets forth the prohibition of state interference with people's religious feelings. Likewise, the first paragraph of Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) reiterates almost exactly the same statement (UNGA, 1966). However, the ICCPR clarifies that this principle cannot always remain unfettered: subsequently, the third paragraph of Article 18 establishes the possibility of the governing power to impose restrictions to such freedom, provided that these limitations are proscribed by law and that they turn out to be proportionate and necessary measures to the goal of protecting some overriding interests, namely public safety, order, health or morals or the nucleus of the fundamental rights and freedoms enjoyed by other members of the community (UNGA, 1966). It is worth recalling now that the conditions to be fulfilled in order to legitimately adopt restrictions to freedom of religion are the same as those provided for the limitations potentially imposable on freedoms of speech and expression. In line with this comparison, it will be highlighted soon how in Bangladesh both freedom of speech and expression and freedom of religion are oftentimes exposed to the same type of potential abuses.

4.2 Domestic legal framework

As previously stated, Article 2A of the Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, as it reads after the 2011 Fifteenth Amendment Act, declares Islam as the state religion of the country. However, the same provision adds that the State shall commit to the recognition of equal status and equal rights in the practice of Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity and other faiths. Moreover, in Article 28, paragraph 1 and 3 reiterate that the State shall refrain from discriminations against citizens on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth (Government of Bangladesh, 1972). Therefore, the formulas contained in the Constitution abide by the international human rights standards examined beforehand, as it prohibits any kind of violation of the individual sphere grounded on religious reasons. Furthermore, the extent to such freedom is further specified by Article 41, which establishes the respect of some other fundamental rights related to religion, provided that the requirements dictated by law, public order and morality are properly fulfilled (Government of Bangladesh, 1972). As this last clause illuminates, the actual compression of the right to freedom of religion stems from the poor and vague construction of ordinary norms, as well as from their arbitrary applications carried out by the judicial bodies and the enforcement agencies. It goes without saying that, as it happens when it comes to freedom of speech and

expression, these two flaws shall not be considered as water-tight compartments: conversely, the former determines and reinforces the latter.

Though there are no specific laws targeting the issue of blasphemy, Bangladeshi authorities have made massive use of Chapter XV of the Penal Code, as well as of Section 57 of the Information and Communication Technology Act (ICTA) and of the Digital Security Act (DSA) to suppress any act perceived to be an offense against Islam (U.S. Department of State, 2020). For example, Article 295A of the Penal Code establishes monetary sanctions or imprisonment for statements or acts which have the deliberate and malicious intent to cause outrage to the religious feelings of any class of the citizens of the country (Government of Bangladesh, 1860). As the provision does not specify in deeper detail what such intent should consist of, the judicial interpretation obviated this lacuna and extended the meaning of malicious intent to include any insult towards the Prophet Muhammad (U.S. Department of State, 2020). Likewise, the Penal Code allows enforcement agencies to censor and confiscate any content destined to publication deemed to contain offensive materials creating “enmity and hatred among the citizens or denigrates religious beliefs” (U.S. Department of State, 2020).

Before its abrogation occurred in 2018, Section 57 of the ICTA had rendered illegal the publication or the transmission of any online content which, according to the specific circumstances of the case, was considered to be fake, obscene, or to have somehow the effect to cause the deprivation and the corruptions of persons, to undermine law and order, to prejudice the image of the State or person or to collide with religious belief or instigate against any person or organisation (emphasis added) (Bangladesh Government, 2006). Also in this case, the vague meaning of the term collision with religious beliefs paved the way to frequent abuses of the government to shut down freedom of religion. For this reason, national and international human rights organisations, activists and advocacy practitioners raised vocal protests against the misuse of this norm, urging for it to be repealed.

However the DSA, the instrument that replaced Section 57, has not brought any substantial improvement in terms of better clarifying the provision. Indeed, Section 8 of the DSA legitimises the Director-General of the Digital Security Agency to subjective identification and removal of all the online content which would endanger the unity of the country, its economic activity, its security, defence, or public order which would otherwise spread racial hatred and hurt religious sentiments (emphasis added) (Government of Bangladesh, 2018).

Therefore, the uncertainty of the description of the category of offences against religion remains. As a result of these grey areas of the legislation, judges and enforcement bodies have excessively large interstices within which they can apply their interpretation and, oftentimes, their arbitrariness. It is worth recalling that, according to the principles enshrined in criminal law and all other laws providing the compression of individuals' freedoms, sanctions of this nature should always be justified by the criterion of the dangerousness of the charged act to the surrounding society. On the contrary, the concept of “hurting religious feelings” has been long deployed as a weapon to defend the privileged position of Islam in the country, by suffocating inoffensive expressions and manifestations of other religious beliefs. Subsequently, freedom of religion in Bangladesh results to be promoted and guaranteed only in the empty statements of the Constitution and to be conversely denied in reality. As a reaction to this, it turns out to be urgent to advocate for the re-drafting of the norms at stake, rendering the incriminated acts more precise and specific. Furthermore, it is important to make sure that public institutions are “religiously impartial” throughout the fulfillment of their duties, in order to respect the principle according to which everyone, without distinctions based on faith and beliefs, is equal before the law.

Religion-Based Violence Against Hindu People

The conflict between Muslims and Hindus

The relationship between Muslims and Hindus in Bangladesh is a complicated matter. Considering that Bangladesh is a Muslim-majority nation, it has become the top country in persecuting religious minorities. The Durga Puja of October 2021, the annual Hindu festival in South Asia that celebrates the goddess Durga, represented how communal violence broke out in several towns of the country, resulting in the vandalisation of Hindu temples and hundreds injured. Local extremist groups allegedly wreaked havoc on Hindu devotees throughout the 10-day festival, causing loss to life and property, trying to obstruct traditional proceedings and rituals. Violence erupted after a viral video showed a Quran placed on a statue in a Hindu shrine. Reports of attacks were documented in dozens of districts of Bangladesh, including Cumilla, Chandpur, Noakhali, Chattogram, Bandarban, Cox's Bazar, Narsingdi, and Gazipur. Security forces were deployed with police firing tear gas into crowds. Community leaders have called this the “worst large-scale mob violence” against Hindus in Bangladesh’s history as Hindu village homes were burned (The Guardian, 2021; BBC, 2021). It is widely acknowledged that the authors of such violence are Islamist extremists as in 2016 when a Hindu temple worker was hacked to death in western Bangladesh. On this occasion, police said no group claimed responsibility for the attack, but it bore hallmarks of recent murders of religious minorities by suspected homegrown Islamist militants (The Guardian, 2016; The Guardian, 2016; HRW, 2021).

The origin of the conflict

The origin of such a strained relationship dates back to the thirteenth century, when foreign Islamic rule gradually spread across the region. Then came the carving out of Pakistan, of which Bangladesh remained part from 1947 until 1971, as a result of the demands for a separate homeland by the Muslims of the Indian subcontinent. Later, based on the Urdu imposition, a movement was started in Bangladesh for separation from Pakistan; this became a reality in 1971 when Bangladesh was proclaimed independent. Even though secularism was officially adopted as a State principle, Islam re-emerged quickly as a strong power. Thus, Bangladesh was soon declared to be in favour of Islam, which played a prominent role in domestic politics (Johansson-Stenman, Mahmud & Martinsson, 2009). The Hindu persecution and communal violence in Bangladesh intensified, demonstrated by the extermination of Hindu villages and the raping of Hindu women, millions of whom sought refuge in India (Hussain, 2009; Herbert, 2019). Those who remained have become constant targets for politicians, discriminatory state policies and Islamic extremists. The steady decrease in the percentage of Bangladeshi Hindus, as evident from the following chart, is a clear indicator of the persecution faced by Hindus in the hostile anti-Hindu atmosphere prevalent in Bangladesh. According to the researchers, almost 11.3 million Hindus were forced to escape from Bangladesh as a result of religious persecution from 1964 to 2013 (Al Jazeera, 2021). Today, in 2022, their dwindling population makes up just 8.2 percent of the total population, in marked contrast to the 28 percent documented during the 1941 census of east Bengal (World Population Review, 2022).

Year	Percentage	Hindu Population	Total population	Notes
1901	33.00	9,546,240	28,927,626	Undivided Bengal
1911	31.50	9,939,825	31,555,363	Undivided Bengal
1921	30.60	10,176,030	33,254,607	
1931	29.40	10,466,988	35,604,189	
1941	28.00	11,759,160	41,999,221	
1951	22.05	9,239,603	42,062,462	Post partition under Pakistan period
1961	18.50	9,379,669	50,804,914	
1974	13.50	9,673,048	71,478,543	After independence of Bangladesh
1981	12.13	10,570,245	87,120,487	
1991	10.5	111,178,866	106,315,583	
2001	9.60	11,822,581	123,151,871	
2011	8.54	12,730,651	149,772,364	

Source: Census of India 1901-1941, Census of East Pakistan 1951-1961, Bangladesh Government Census 1974-2011 (Retrieved from "Latest News @", Newkerala.com; State.gov. "Bangladesh – Population Census 1991"; catalog.ihsn.org).

The sharp fall in the Hindu population in Bangladesh stands as a mute testimony of this unending communal persecution (The First Post, 2022). According to the Research and Empowerment Organization (REO), the main types of persecutions and violence consist of kidnapping, forceful conversion, eviction from home, false allegations of demeaning of Islam along with extrajudicial killings, and violence against Hindu women. Many times, people just disappear like the case of Ms. Shipanna Sarkar, a thirteen year-old Hindu girl studying at the Hilchiya High and college who did not come back from school, or the case of Dr. Lata Samaddar who was repeatedly insulted and orally abused by a traffic policeman for wearing a bindi. Another case is that of Mr. Gobindra Chandra Arjo, who has been missing since April 11th, 2022. The family claim that he was kidnapped because of his work as a Hindu rights activist and organising secretary of Bangladesh Puja Udjapan Parishad at Narandiya Upajela. He has allegedly been killed by Islamic fanatics (REO-GHDR, 2022).

The repercussions on neighbouring countries

Under Sheikh Hasina, the Awami League government is managing a delicate balance of prosecuting such groups while maintaining the narrative of Bangladesh's Islamic identity. At the moment, she is considering reverting to the secular 1972 constitution, although it is unclear whether this is politically viable (WION, 2021). Her government faces a challenge in maintaining a good bipartisan relationship with India, which is of utmost strategic importance both as a strategic partner and a trusted friend. This relationship has worsened, however, since Narendra Modi's far-right Hindu government took power in India. When Modi visited Bangladesh earlier in 2021, protests erupted into violence that left 12 dead (BBC, 2021). The proximity with countries such as India and Myanmar is quite significant when considering the huge exodus of Hindus who crossed the borders to escape from violence. During the abovementioned Durga Puja, the erupted protests seeped over the border into the neighbouring Indian state of Tripura, where more than a dozen retaliatory rallies by right-wing Hindu group Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) escalated into violence and anti-Muslim attacks (The Guardian, 2021; Washington Post, 2021). On this occasion, Hindutva supporters call for India to be a Hindu nation, demanding the deportation of Muslims and advocating for decreased immigration from Bangladesh. Thus, attacks on Hindus will always

have repercussions on neighbouring India (This Week in Asia, 2021). This xenophobic rhetoric provides ample ammunition for Islamist political elements in Bangladesh to turn justified anger into resentment that is then taken out on religious minorities (South Asian Today, 2021).

Social media and the religious propaganda

In such attacks, social media and the digital space have a particular role in spreading news and religious propaganda considering that the country had 30 million social media users in 2020, almost 22 percent of the total population. Facebook is the most used social media platform with 94 percent of the total social media users (Social Media, 2019; Al-Zaman, 2021). Social Networking Sites (SNS) constitute a space where religious communities define their association based on how their religious subjectivities are interwoven with their political practices (Bhatia, 2021). For example, social media in India witnessed a rise in the presence of religious nationalism with people actively practising their politico-religious ideology online, especially evident in the abusive content towards religious minorities. Thus, they deploy Twitter to reify discrimination against people. This means also that incidents of disinformation-led violence spread as most of the disinformation is intertwined with religion (Al-Zaman, 2021). An example is Bangladesh which has become a fertile land of religious disinformation and disinformation-led violence such as Ramu violence in 2012, Comilla and Pabna violence in 2013, the Nasirnagar attack in 2016, Thakurpara attack in 2017, and Bhola violence in 2019, are becoming commonplace, disturbing the social peace and interreligious harmony (Bhatia, 2021). What has to be understood is that social media does not implant the seeds of violence in society. Rather, the ideology of violence is rooted in society, and social media assists it. An example is an incident that took place on April 4th, 2019 in Narail, a southwestern district of Bangladesh where a Hindu man allegedly defamed the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in a Facebook post. Hate speech is the most common destructive reaction that includes vile language, anti-Hindu and anti-Muslim sentiment, demand for brutal punishment, and xenophobia. With this disinformation, anti-religious sentiments also flourish and the techniques of hate spin, a systematic process of cornering the minorities in both virtual and real space, emerge (Bhatia, 2021). Now more studies should pay attention to the offline impacts of online communal disinformation on religious minorities in Bangladesh (Bhatia, 2021; Al-Zaman, 2021).

The culture of impunity

What emerges is a strong culture of impunity for the perpetrators of violence against Hindus and minority groups. Amnesty International, along with the UN resident coordinator in Bangladesh, called on the Bangladeshi government to bring the perpetrators to justice and to ensure access to effective remedies for victims. However, the reality is far away from this practice as the main party, the Awami League, condemns the attacks but is quite inactive to stop such attacks that often follow the same pattern, and nobody gets punished (Al Jazeera Stream, 2021). Indeed, first, something is posted on Facebook and is marked as 'insulting to Islam' by others, and then a group of people attacks a particular spot where religious minorities live. Thus, Hindu victims of attacks struggle to receive legal recourse from the government, despite promises of reform. Even if people file cases, justice is not served even after filing complaints. This happens because influential people stop police from filing evidence of the attacks and investigations weaken over time, and the perpetrators get released soon. Thus, the Hindu community has never received the protection it deserves, rather parties tried to use the community for their political interest (DW, 2021; News Laundry, 2018).

But what does the constitution of Bangladesh say? According to the Constitution, “the State religion of the Republic is Islam, but the State shall ensure equal status and equal rights in the practice of the Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, and other religions” (The Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, 1972). It provides for

the right to profess, practice, or propagate all religions, and the state's religious communities have the right to establish, maintain, and manage their religious institutions (Office Of International Religious Freedom, 2021). Under the penal code, statements made with a “deliberate and malicious” intent to insult religious sentiments are subject to fines of up to two years in prison. However, the courts have interpreted it to include insulting Islam. The criminal code allows the government to confiscate all copies of any newspaper, online or not, containing language that causes hatred among the citizens or denigrates religious beliefs. This could be related to the lack of freedom of expression in the country and to the way in which social networking platforms are used for religious purposes. Several sections of the Information and Communication Technology Act and the Digital Security Act charge individuals for acts perceived to be a slight against Islam (Office Of International Religious Freedom, 2021). Thus, while Hasina did promise to revert to the 1972 Constitution when she returned to power in 2009, she did not act as she promised because the party was divided and did not have the clear majority it now enjoys. However, secularist groups and many Awami League leaders sustain that it is impossible to stave off the radical Islamist challenge by pandering to them when their morale is boosted by the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan (This week in Asia, 2021). Thus, until now, the governing Awami League has failed to tackle the rising religious intolerance and fundamentalism (BBC, 2021; Office Of International Religious Freedom, 2021). Through in-depth investigations and committees resembling truth and reconciliation, the government should establish legal protections for minorities while consciously cultivating inter-community interactions in civil society. Combating religious fundamentalism is a complicated task but ensuring that every citizen's needs are met is a good way to dissipate some populist discontent that often underlies religious violence. Taking a historical view, one can frame interreligious dynamics through the lens of politics and power instead of the rather simplistic one of religion alone (South Asia Today, 2021). As the trust between Muslims and Hindus is broken, the Bangladesh government should intervene.

Violence against Hindu women (Highlighting the rape issues)

On the footsteps of Liberation War

March of 1971 was a turning point for Bangladesh, then known as Eastern Pakistan. It was the time when cultural and linguistic identity of Eastern Pakistan was triggered and the long-standing goal of creating an all-Muslim nation was again in news. This revolution is particularly relevant in the conversation of rape in Bangladesh. It marks the start of the “rape-culture”, with its special regard to religious persecution. Reports and rumours suggest that Yahya Khan and General Tikka Khan were ordered to rape women who supported the Bangladeshi movement and Hindu women, all in order to create a “Pure Pakistan”. These war crimes were based on multiple concepts of purity, pride, clashing egos etc.

The concept of 'Purity'

This notion of “purity” born out of rape by Muslim men to women of other religion is the seed of most rapes occurring in Bangladesh, and other Muslim majority nations. Muslim men consider it as a part of religious activity to impregnate Muslim women for their salvation. An estimate of 200,000 to 400,000 women were raped and abducted by military of Pakistan who supported the Bangladesh movement, which included Hindu women majorly (Roychowdhury, 2016). Post liberation war, the Muslim women were freed from the rapes done by Muslim men for “purity”, however, Hindu, Christian and other tribal women are still highly vulnerable of the violation.

Distorting and refashioned principles of Islam

The notion of purifying non-Muslim women in its extended form is promoted under Islamic people. Even though the Quran strictly prohibits rape in any form. Rape, under the Quran is an intolerant crime called Zina Al- Zibr or Ightisab and falls under the rules of Hirabah. Crimes under zina, as well as rape, are subject to the law's most severe penalties – Hadd (literally 'ultimate punishment') – death by stoning or, in the case of an unmarried person, 100 lashes in public. (Ceccherini, 2012). Disregarding the ethics given in the Quran, the community is driven by the hatred between the two religions caused by the partition of nations, India-Pakistan and the war crimes that took place thereto.

The Muslims of Bangladesh are driven by their twisted ideologies of attaining Behesta (Heaven) for themselves and their seven generations by converting non-Muslims. (Barua & Jyoti, 2017). This notion is extensively used as a justification and as absurd as this sounds, conservative societies of Bangladesh are at par with the rapists' ideology. The acts of violence perpetrated upon Hindu women are normalised in the name of religion. The hatred amongst the two communities aids the rapists to live freely with no charges or persecution by the Bangladeshi society. It further encourages rapists to commit more and more violence upon Hindu women and get away with it easily. The government or the law also refrains from taking stringent actions against these criminals for the vote bank is heavily Muslim majority, and the political parties also breed upon the very idea of creating an all-Muslims nation and persecuting Hindus.

In 2019, Suad Saleh, an Islamic female professor at Al-Azhar University, Cairo, Egypt, made a highly controversial statement on a television programme saying that Allah (God) makes it permissible for Muslim men to rape non-Muslim women in order to 'humiliate' them. She made this statement for an interview wherein the discussion revolved around the purchase of slaves from Asian countries for religious purposes, Saleh legitimised the slavery saying that Allah permits Muslim men to have sexual relations with slave women. (Muslim men can

rape non-Muslim women to teach them a lesson, claims woman Islamic professor, 2017)

The conflict of Pride and Honour; Revenge Rape

South Asian societies are particularly sensitive to their family and community's pride, which has been concreted into women putting a heavy burden of carrying the honor of the family on the women's shoulders. How the women of their family behave and more specifically whose property those women are (of their father's before marriage and of their husband's post that) and hence who has the right over their body. Women's bodies play an important role in deriving man's manliness and therefore are a personification of community's honor and pride. Traditionally, women of any community are primarily associated with the honor of the family. In many societies in south Asia, women, despite their religion, were subjected to rapes and oppression for humiliating the criminal. A crime against a woman in a family brings great deal of shame and dishonour and that is the reason why families across south Asia do not consider complaining against the sexual assault and rapes.

This narrative clearly demonstrates the increasing inter-community rapes and particularly over women of minority communities. The primary reason being the rising hatred and the aim of humiliating the minority and forcing them to vacate the nation as the last resort. The rising case of rapes and sexual assaults over women in Bangladesh raises alarming concern for the future of minority communities in Bangladesh. The hatred between two major communities in Bangladesh triggers the consequences of rape in general. It also brings forward the notion of losing to the other by having control over the body of the women of the opposite community. The rape culture is foremostly a fight between the males of the two counterparts and patriarchy lies at the root. It leads to the idea of snatching and violating the most precious and sensitive “possession”, allowing for a sense of winning and losing among sides.

India condemns violence against Hindus in Bangladesh

While tabling the Citizenship Amendment Bill in the Parliament of India, India's Home Minister, Mr. Amit Shah, condemned the injustice, persecution, and violence that the minority Hindus, Sikhs, Jains, Buddhists and Parsis are subjected to in Bangladesh. He further mentioned that, under the famous well-articulated Bhola attack more than 200 Hindu women were raped and tortured by Muslim men (Sanghamitra, 2019). India, being a Hindu-majority nation, opened its door for Hindus in Bangladesh, considering the torturous condition of Hindus in Bangladesh.

Case study: Chandpur district

Oppression, persecution, and torture by the Muslim majority in Bangladesh over the Hindus is quite common. The Jihadi groups relentlessly perpetrate violence over the minorities specially Hindus under the garb of religion (as discussed above) and conversion. These statistics and cases are not only extensively barred from social media but also ignored by the justice system. However, the horrifying incident of Chandpur district shocked the whole world and created headlines across nations for the heinous crimes that were committed in a house of Hindu family.

The jihadi group of extremist Islam raped all the women of a Hindu family including a ten-year old girl who succumbed to death by the inhumane crime. Not only did the Hindu community condemn the violence, but Muslims across the world were also shaken from what happened. There were Facebook posts condemning the incident wherein people highly criticised the government for the loose laws and rising cases of rapes in the nation. This further escalated into a mob lynching by the Hindu community, in which a member of their community, a 25-year-old man, was again brutally murdered by the Muslims, and his body was found floating in a pond near the

Hindu temple (Jihadis in Bangladesh, 2021).

This horrifying incident is one of the hundreds of persecution cases against Hindus, that goes unnoticed in Bangladesh. One more horrifying incident that took place at a Hindu festival of Durga Puja, which remains of major importance to Bengali Hindus, where a group of Hindus celebrating Durga Puja was attacked by the Muslim community. During this attack, the Pandals (place of worship) was demolished and temples destroyed. After this, the majority mob killed many Hindus and raped their sisters and daughters. According to the home minister, Mr. Asaduzzaman, the attack was pre-planned by the attackers. The Bangladesh chapter of WHF has also reported that a total of 23 Hindu women or girls have been raped so far (Mandal, 2021).

Loose Laws of Bangladesh

Bangladesh, being a Muslim majority nation, has laws and regulations formulated around principles of Islam, because that is what the population believes is the correct way of life. This formulation also encourages the population to also follow the laws, However, these laws, when it comes to the issues of women, are highly conservative and patriarchal in nature. As Hina Jilani, a lawyer working for women's rights, in Pakistan talks about rules under Islam around rape says, that “f a woman is raped but has no evidence to prove it, the very fact that she had admitted to the sexual act may lead to her own prosecution for adultery or fornication.”

Due to the lack of stringent laws over the issue of rapes in Bangladesh, it becomes especially tough for minority women to establish a case against the majority. Without any witnesses or backing by the authorities or local parties, most of the violence against women goes unnoticed. This loophole is also a consequence of a lack of ministry for minorities to back the victims of violence and aid the community in taking actions against the perpetrators.

It was only recently, in March 2022, that the government of Bangladesh turned down 'immoral character' evidence in rape cases. It took human and women's rights activists over ten years to demand for the change (Bangladesh to ban 'immoral character' evidence in rape cases, 2022). The British brought the idea of 'immoral character' which has led to injustice to thousands of women. The clause also makes it easier for Muslim men to harass Hindu and other minority women and raise a claim of immoral character and escape confinement.

These cases and incidents of rapes and sexual assaults over women in Bangladesh has become a key tool for the majority to threaten the Hindus over every step of their lives. It not only affects women's lives but also makes the survival of the whole Hindu community miserable in the nation. It is obvious that in a nation with a heavy majority of Muslims, Hindus or any other minority community can only obey them because their pursuit of taking actions will only make their personal life and others lives miserable with all the threats and violence especially against women. There is need of strict action against these majority extremist groups, Bangladesh needs special laws for minorities, with its strict implementation.

Persecution Against Christian Communities

As stated earlier, Bangladesh has been struck by a series of violent incidents targeting its religious minorities. Many times, they are provoked by domestic militant groups or by international armed extremists such as Islamic State, but in both cases, the authorities have failed to protect its Ahmadi, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu and Shi'a Muslim communities from these attacks. Among the religious minorities in Bangladesh, Christians are strongly discriminated against.

Portuguese Christians, merchants and missionaries, arrived in Bangladesh 500 years ago and founded their communities. Today Bangladeshi Christians form a tiny group in the Muslim-majority nation and face various challenges because of their faith. Christians make up less than one percent of Bangladesh's population, concentrated primarily in Barisal, Khulna and Gazipur. They face discrimination from both their Muslim neighbours and the government (Minority Rights Group International, 2016).

Confrontations between Christians and the majority population were hitherto uncommon. However, Christians have often been marginalised in many areas of the society, including employment or housing. According to experts, Muslim landlords refused to rent apartments to Christian families, as far as employment is concerned, Christians used to work disproportionately in the most poorly paid jobs such as street sweepers. Bangladesh has also witnessed a number of cases where Christians have been specifically targeted, especially during periods of political upheaval, such as in early 2014 during the national elections. One of the first major attacks took place on June 3rd, 2001, when a bomb was detonated in a Catholic church in Gopalganj village, south of Bangladesh, killing at least nine people and injuring 20 others (New York Times, 2001). While this remains the worst single incident against the community, violence against Christians has continued, further worsening their marginalised position within Bangladeshi society (Minority Rights Group International, 2016).

In the areas of Chittagong, mainly populated by Christian indigenous communities, land disputes with Bengali Muslims settlers have taken on a religious dimension. In 2014, Mandi Catholics were attacked by a group of Muslims and a house in Jamalpur set alight due to a dispute over land. In the same year, a local land dispute generated an attack on a convent in Dinajpur by more than 50 armed men, including robbery and attempted rape. In the same area, 1,500 Christians have been displaced for the same reason. Increasingly, Christians have also been targeted by extremist groups. For instance, at the beginning of October 2015, alleged Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) members sent a series of death threats to several priests in Pabna. The number of assaults on Christians increased, preventing them from celebrating the traditional Christmas midnight mass service. In 2018, several Christians were attacked in the Gopalganj district, southwest of Dhaka, because of a long-running dispute over a fishpond belonging to the main church. The same church had received pressure from a local political group. Indeed, in those areas, Christians face pressure from influential locals, as church-owners have many properties. Christians are a minority and powerless, so they are vulnerable to violence because they have little to do against their aggressors (World Watch Monitor, 2018).

These forced evictions are sometimes caused by the same government. Sometimes it is difficult to determine whether these disputes are a result of deliberate government discrimination against religious minorities or of government inefficiency. The government continued construction projects, for example, on land traditionally owned by indigenous communities in the Moulvibazar and Madhupur forest areas. Such disputes occurred in areas near new roads or industrial development zones, where land prices had recently increased. One example happened in Dhaka, where a 65-year-old Catholic man lost his small house near the Catholic church in Tejgaon

when a local Muslim occupied his land on in October 2015, escorted by fifty-armed people. They broke into the house and evicted his family. The man had asked for help for two years but in vain. Paradoxically, the Catholic man, who is now retired, is still paying for the bills even after it was illegally occupied (Asia News, 2018; Asia News, 2015). The same kind of discrimination happened to a Catholic woman, in Kafrul Quasi parish, in Dhaka when she sold her house to a construction company that was supposed to give her a flat in exchange. However, she only got death threats and was obliged to live in a rented house in the same neighbourhood. These illegal appropriations are possible because local police, civil authorities, and political leaders enabled property appropriation for financial gain or shielded politically influential property appropriators from prosecution. Rather than the policy of the government against minorities, the lack of resolution of some of these disputes is due to ineffective judicial and cadastral systems and inappropriate political and financial weight of the communities concerned (Asia News, 2018).

Violence against Christians also happens when people decide to convert from a Muslim, Hindu or Buddhist background to Christianity. Men are often threatened and beaten for betraying their culture and religion. In the town of Tangail, northwest of Dhaka, for example, a young man was attacked allegedly because of his conversion to Christianity from Islam, and the fact his father was a pastor. World Watch Monitor has reported other attacks against Bangladeshi Christians, such as in June 2016 when a Christian shopkeeper was hacked to death (World Watch Monitor, 2016). Recently converted people often gather in small house churches or meet secretly in groups due to fear of attack. Tribal Christians are vulnerable to persecution both because of their ethnicity and because of their religion and are often the victims of land-grabbing or targeted violence. Church leaders, in particular, often face false accusations of coercive conversions (Open Doors UK, 2022). This marginalisation is present also in other spheres of the society as in politics where people remained underrepresented. In schools, young students were unable to enrol in religion classes because of an insufficient number of religious minority teachers for mandatory religious education classes. In these cases, school officials generally allowed local religious institutions, parents, or others to hold religious studies classes for such students outside school hours and sometimes exempted students from the religious education requirement.

Persecutions Against Rohingya Minorities

As far as the Rohingyas are concerned, the arrival of 700,000 Rohingya refugees from neighbouring Myanmar in the past four years has led to thousands of people living in refugee camps (Mim, 2020). Nearly all who arrived during the 2017 influx sought shelter in and around the refugee settlements of Kutupalong and Nayapara in Cox's Bazar District (HRW, 2020). 90 percent of stateless Rohingya refugees live in Bangladesh (UNHCR, 2022). Rohingya people have suffered decades of violence and persecution in Myanmar and, as a Muslim ethnic minority living in a predominantly Buddhist country, the Rohingya are not recognised as an official ethnic group. However, this big flow of people causes several problems to the management of the country which is already affected by several religious disputes, as described above. Although the 2022 Joint Response Plan (JRP) for the Rohingya Humanitarian Crisis, was co-hosted by the government of Bangladesh, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and UNHCR, the religious issue is far from being solved in such refugee camps (UN, 2022). In these shelters, there is a large risk of Islamic radicalisation especially for Christians. Human Rights Watch estimates approximately 1,500 Rohingya in the refugee settlements are Christians. The dichotomy among Christians and Muslims is also present in Rohingya camps in Bangladesh. Indeed, as ethnic Rohingya are predominantly Muslim, being a Christian may lead to discrimination. Many Rohingya Christian people in Cox's Bazar camps suffer harassment and violence from Muslim Rohingya. Considering that the living conditions in refugee camps are often poor, these religious violent disputes jeopardise even more the life of those people who feel unsafe (Asia News, 2021).

In 2020, Bangladesh Christian leaders expressed deep concern about an attack on Rohingya Christian families at the Kutupalong Maga refugee camp in Cox's Bazar. The following day, 70 people were moved to a UNHCR transit camp. The attack has been blamed on members of the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), who destroyed homes and churches. Police described the act as an “ordinary law-and-order incident”. At present, more than 740,000 refugees are living in tents in various camps in Cox's Bazar, on the border with Myanmar. (Asia News, 2020). In March 2019, Rohingya Christians sent a petition to the U.N. The High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) sought protection, however, Rohingya Christians complained about the slow response from the Bangladeshi authorities and the U.N. There are an estimated 1.1 million Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh and at least several hundred are Rohingya Christians (Fortify Rights, 2020).

Conclusion

In conclusion, although Art. 18 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR) specifically addresses the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, which was incorporated into Art. 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), in Bangladesh there is still no harmony between the different religious ethnicities. The various cases of violence, persecution and violation of the fundamental rights of religious minorities do not seem to be enough to alarm the Bangladeshi government. Although the government took measures against those cases of violence several times, the victims always complain about the lack of justice and the impunity that the perpetrators have. The Bangladeshi government needs to take serious measures to fight Religious-based violence and reinforce the secularity of the State.

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