

UNEQUAL FAITH: EXAMINING RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AND THE PATH FORWARD FOR MINORITIES IN BANGLADESH

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ABSTRACT

This study critically examines the status of religious freedom for minority groups in Bangladesh, with a primary focus on Hindus, Buddhists, and Christians. In Bangladesh, where Islam holds the status of the state religion as per the constitution, religious minorities often experience a sense of inferiority. Drawing data from various sources such as websites, newspaper articles, books, reports, and scholarly papers, it is concluded that in order to increase the well-being of ethnic minorities across the nation, there must be a strong political will and government commitment. Identifying each ethnic minority's unique vulnerabilities and developing appropriate government responses are also crucial.

Keywords: Minorities, Bangladesh, Political, Social, Economic, Muslims.

INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh, situated in South Asia, shares its borders with Myanmar (Burma) to the far southeast, India to the west, north, and east, and the Bay of Bengal to the south. Despite being predominantly ethnically homogeneous, Bangladesh boasts a diverse religious landscape. Muslims constitute the majority, comprising 92.3 percent of the population, while Hindus make up 7.95 percent. The remaining 0.91 percent includes followers of other religions such as Buddhism, Christianity, and various minority faiths, according to the 2022 census.

The Hindu community stands as the largest religious minority in Bangladesh, predominantly comprising Bangla-speaking individuals. Regions such as Barisal, Khulna, Faridpur, and Jessore exhibit the highest concentrations of Hindus. Notably, Comilla, situated near the Tripura border and close to India, boasts the highest ratio of Hindus to Muslims nationwide. Buddhists form the second-largest religious minority, with approximately 1 million

individuals (0.61% of the population) spread across the country. In the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), where Buddhism thrives, the majority of adherents belong to indigenous tribes known as the Jumma. The Jumma, comprised of 11 distinct groups, including the Chakma and Marma, boast unique cultures and languages. Christianity represents another religious minority, constituting less than 1% of Bangladesh's populace. The majority of Christians reside in areas like Barisal, Khulna, and Gazipur. Historically, conflicts over religion between these minority groups and the dominant population were rare, though recent times have seen some tensions emerge.

In our contemporary, complicated society, achieving religious freedom for all levels remains an overwhelming challenge, despite being an ideal that is easily envisioned. Bangladesh faces numerous hurdles in ensuring the freedom of religious minorities. Over time, policies implemented by various military regimes and

democratic administrations have exacerbated the alienation of minorities. The dominant religion, Islam, has progressively overshadowed other faiths and ethnic groups, leading to an identity crisis among minorities. Additionally, Bangladesh's constitution fails to acknowledge the linguistic diversity of its ethnic and tribal populations, who are integral citizens of the nation. Both the BNP and the Awami League, the country's primary political parties, prioritize their own political agendas over community interests. The detrimental cycle of political rivalry between these parties contributes to political violence, which extremely affects minority communities.

Hindu Minorities in Bangladesh

Bangla-speaking Hindus constitute the largest religious minority group in Bangladesh, residing throughout the country. Comilla, situated near the Tripura border, boasts the highest ratio of Hindus to Muslims in Bangladesh. As per the 2022 census, Hindus account for 13.1 million individuals, comprising 7.95% of the population. Over the past 45 years, the Hindu community, alongside other religious and ethnic minority groups, has witnessed a significant decline in numbers due to various challenges, including human rights abuses and religious persecution. Since the partition of India in 1947, minority populations in Bangladesh have endured a cycle of systematic ethnic cleansing, resulting in a decrease from 23% in 1951 to 7% in 2022 ("Census 2022", 2022; Joshi, 2003; Samad, 1998).

In some areas of Bangladesh, the decline in the minority population has accelerated in recent years, with the absolute numbers of Hindus currently diminishing (BARUA and Jyoti, 2017). The Hindu population in Bangladesh has faced considerable adversity stemming from political events since 1947. During the Bangladesh Liberation War, Hindus were disproportionately targeted by many Pakistanis, who held them responsible for the secession. This resulted in targeted killings, rapes, and other human rights violations against Hindu communities ("Census 2022", 2022; Lam, 2018). Despite these challenges, Hindus remain the largest religious minority in Bangladesh.

Since the beginning of the millennium, Hindus have faced significant persecution from Islamic

extremists, prompting many to flee to West Bengal, India. Despite ongoing persecution, Hindus have managed to garner some political influence due to their concentration in certain geographic regions (Lam, 2018).

BUDDHIST COMMUNITY IN BANGLADESH

Buddhists represent the second-largest religious minority in Bangladesh, comprising 1 million individuals (0.61% of the population) residing across the nation. The Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) is home to the majority of tribes practicing Buddhism, including the culturally and linguistically diverse indigenous peoples collectively known as the Jumma. Predominantly consisting of the Chakma and Marma communities, the Jumma people consider themselves Buddhists ("Census 2022", 2022; Lam, 2018). The CHT, renowned for its picturesque mountains and landscape, covers 5,093 square miles, constituting 10 percent of Bangladesh's total land area (Roy, 2000). Traditionally, these indigenous tribes were primarily located in the CHT, Mymensingh, Sylhet, and Rajshahi regions, with many engaged in shifting cultivation in rural areas. Their social structure, marital customs, rituals, dietary habits, and other societal norms set them apart from the rest of the Bangladeshi population. The largest among the Buddhist tribal population in Bangladesh is the Chakma tribe, numbering 55,000 individuals (Chakma, 2016; Mundhe, 2017). Bangladesh's Buddhist community comprises individuals from four distinct ethnic groups—Aryans, Dravidians, Tibeto-Burmans, and Austics—who have gradually assimilated. They often assert their lineage as the original inhabitants of the CHT, known as the Jumma people or Highlanders. Ethnically, linguistically, culturally, and religiously, the Jumma people maintain a distinct identity from the Bengali population of Bangladesh (Mundhe, 2017).

Christian Community

Christianity In Bengal Traces Its Origins Back To 1577 When The Mughal Emperor Akbar Allowed The Portuguese To Settle And Build Permanent Churches In The Region. The Jesuits, The First Missionaries In East Bengal, Established The Area's Inaugural Church In 1599. Over Time, Individuals From Tribal,

Islamic, And Hindu Backgrounds Have Converted To Christianity. Official Data Indicates That Christians Constitute Approximately 0.30 Percent Of Bangladesh's Population, Primarily Concentrated In Barisal, Khulna, And Gazipur. The Initial Christians In Bengal Were Portuguese, Who Intermarried With Local Women, While Hindus And Muslims Who Converted To Christianity Form The Second-Largest Group Of Christians ("Census 2022", 2022; Timm, 2002). The Majority Of Bangladesh's Present-Day Christians Belong To Tribal Communities, Marking The Third Wave Of Conversions (Mundhe, 2017). Until Recently, Religious Conflicts Between Christians And The Dominant Population Were Uncommon, But Prejudice Has Frequently Influenced Their Lives In Bangladesh, Particularly Concerning Employment And Housing (Lam, 2018).

LEGAL STATUS OF MINORITIES BANGLADESH'S CONSTITUTIONAL POSITION ON MINORITIES

The Bangladeshi constitution does not officially recognize any minority groups, nor does it outline specific protections or measures for their advancement. Instead, it upholds the principle of treating all individuals within the state fairly. The cornerstone of this principle lies in Part III of the Constitution, where the right to equality before the law and equal protection under it is enshrined. "Equal protection" ensures that individuals in similar circumstances are treated alike under the law.

Article 27 lays the groundwork for equality, while Article 28 expands on it in specific contexts. It expressly prohibits discrimination based on religion, ethnicity, caste, sex, place of birth, or any combination thereof in Article 28, clause (1). The public sentiment reflected in this article opposes prejudice. Central to its provisions is the term "discrimination," which denotes the act of unfairly treating individuals differently or unfavorably compared to others.

Article 29 of the Constitution adopts a similar stance by addressing the viability of employment in the public sector. Its core objective is to assert a constitutional entitlement to public sector employment with equal opportunities. However, in practice, minorities in Bangladesh often do not reap the benefits of these lofty principles of

equality. Despite being granted equal rights under the Constitution, minorities do not necessarily receive the same level of legal protection and developmental assistance. Like Article 23, the provision on equality exhibits certain dichotomies.

The Bangladesh Constitution features limited provisions, and the government isn't obligated to adhere to them. Article 28(4) grants the state the discretion to implement targeted measures for the advancement of any marginalized segments of its populace. Additionally, Article 29(3)(a) empowers the state to enact legislation mandating the reservation of positions for underrepresented groups in the government, or requiring individuals to profess a specific religion or belong to a particular denomination for roles connected to religious or denominational institutions' functions.

Articles 8(1), 8(1A), 2A, and Article 25, upon scrutiny, diminish the significance of equality clauses (2) within the Bangladeshi Constitution. These discriminatory clauses were not part of the original Constitution but were introduced through subsequent amendments, notably the 5th and 8th. Article 8(1) replaces secularism with an absolute requirement of faith in Allah, contradicting the essence of the freedom struggle. Similarly, Article 8(1A) imposes a burden on minority citizens by mandating unwavering trust in Allah while fulfilling legal obligations, potentially compromising their religious sentiments. The 8th Amendment elevating Islam as the official state religion marginalized practitioners of other faiths, undermining their status as equal citizens. The concept of a "state religion" in the Constitution adversely affects the religious rights and sentiments of minority communities in Bangladesh, despite Article 2-A permitting peaceful coexistence and practice of diverse religions (Mandal, n.d.).

Education and Minority Communities

Educational institutions play a vital role in the functioning and development of a nation, and Bangladesh's government oversees various secondary and upper secondary educational boards, including the Sanskrit and Pali Education Board, and the Madarsa Education Board. Established in 1948, the Sanskrit and Pali Education Board aimed to serve

underrepresented groups, predominantly Hindus and Buddhists. Initially housed in a modest setting, it relocated to Budh Vihar in Kalimpur in 1968 due to resource constraints (Azad, 2005). However, disparities in employment conditions exist between instructors hired by the Pali and Sanskrit boards and those hired by Urdu or Madrassa boards. Teachers affiliated with the former receive distinct remuneration and additional benefits not extended to their counterparts in the Urdu and Madrassa boards. Notably, a decree issued by Ershad, the military ruler, in 1984 prohibited the recruitment of Pali and Sanskrit teachers, affecting both public and private colleges and universities.

Currently, the Sanskrit and Pali Education Board receives only one lakh rupees annually, which proves inadequate for sustaining schools and colleges, conducting examinations, procuring stationery, and other essential tasks. The government's reluctance to support this board contrasts starkly with its generous funding of the Madarsa Education Board, which boasts over 1,000 members and receives billions of rupees. This disparate treatment of the Pali and Sanskrit boards raises questions about underlying biases and resentment. Such discrimination goes against the principles outlined in Bangladesh's constitution. Despite minority populations constituting 40% of the educated youth, their representation in government services remains disproportionately low, particularly for Hindus. Shockingly, only 2.3% of Hindu students who excel in written examinations manage to pass interview exams, highlighting systemic disparities (Azad, 2005).

Thanks to the efforts of UNDP, Buddhists in the CHT now have improved educational opportunities. UNDP has highlighted the dire conditions in the CHT, categorizing educational achievements into six groups: primary incomplete, primary completed, secondary incomplete, secondary completed, above secondary, and no education. Shockingly, more than half of household members aged five and older lack literacy, irrespective of ethnicity, though the percentage of illiteracy is higher among indigenous groups compared to Bangalees. According to a UNDP study, only 7.8% of CHT residents and 4% of secondary education students have completed their

education. While primary school graduates are more prevalent among Bengalese, secondary school graduates are slightly more common among indigenous people.

Children attending government-run schools in the CHT, which border India and Myanmar endure mistreatment and are often subjected to ridicule by teachers and peers. This unfortunate situation contributes to a sense of alienation among the children and within the community. The CHT is primarily inhabited by the Buddhist ethnic population, constituting around 1% of the nation's total population. According to IRIN, over half of the households surveyed in the CHT lack formal education, and less than 8% of individuals who start school manage to complete their primary education. Shockingly, a mere 2% of Bangladesh's ethnic minorities successfully finish secondary school, highlighting significant educational challenges in the region ("Bangladesh Ethnic Minorities", 2011).

Since Bangladesh gained independence from Pakistan, no member of the Hindu community has ever served as chairman of the public services commission. Additionally, the panel has never received a nomination from a Hindu academic. The appointments of chancellor, vice chancellor, and treasurer in universities are made by the president or prime minister, yet despite potential competence among minority community members, none have held the position of vice chancellor since independence. This vacancy was noted (Azad, 2002). Access to military and government positions, including elected roles, appears unequal for religious minorities. However, the Bangladesh Bank stands out as a significant exception, with approximately 10% non-Muslims occupying top positions. Minority representation on government hiring committees is often lacking (SAHR, 2009).

The Bangladesh Civil Service Examination (BCSE), administered by the Bangladesh Public Service Commission (PSC), serves as the gateway to the country's civil service. Among the most renowned and demanding public service exams in Bangladesh is the BCS test, overseen by the PSC as mandated by law. While all individuals possess a fundamental right to access the civil service, religious minorities often encounter discrimination on various pretexts, despite legal or constitutional prohibitions against such

practices (Beetham, 2006). In response to this issue, the government has intermittently reserved representation rights for minorities through gazette notifications in 1972, 1976, 1985, and 1997 (Barman, 2011).

Bangladesh's Minority Communities and Religious Freedom

The 1972 constitution of Bangladesh laid the foundation for a secular government, prohibiting all manifestations of communalism, political exploitation of religion, and discrimination based on religious affiliation (Article 2). Secularism was prominently highlighted as a guiding principle in the preamble of the constitution. While the constitution prohibited the exploitation of religion for political motives, it upheld the right to practice religion as a private matter.

Despite the nominal secularism of the government, religion exerts a significant influence on politics in Bangladesh. With the majority of the population being Muslim, the government is keenly aware of this demographic reality. However, minority groups have not been adequately safeguarded. Religious minorities often encounter discrimination in both social and political contexts. Incidents of violence, resulting in fatalities and injuries, against religious minorities were alarmingly common both before and after the 2001 election. Following the Ayodha event, instances of Hindus being coerced into marriages with Muslims and the imposition of the Jaziya tax, particularly in districts like Jhenidah, Jessore, and Satkhira, instilled fear among minority communities (Mitra, 2001).

Buddhist groups face similar dangers and challenges. The CHT Commission has urged authorities to conduct impartial investigations into reports of frequent assaults on tribal members and illegal land seizures. The aftermath of the 1992 Babri Masjid demolition, which sparked widespread religious, political, and social turmoil, exacerbated tensions. This event triggered riots in sensitive areas throughout the subcontinent, revealing the increasingly evident mindset of the majority group.

The level of religious freedom in Bangladesh remains largely confined to paper when it comes to religious minorities. Minority religious groups

often find themselves unable to freely and peacefully practice their religious rituals, leading many to forgo celebrations altogether. While constitutional protections exist, they prove inadequate in ensuring genuine security and freedom of religion. In this regard, the Bangladeshi government has failed to provide effective protection. It's noteworthy that both military and democratic administrations have fallen short in safeguarding the freedom of religion for minorities.

Political Status of Minorities

The forty-year political history of independent Bangladesh can be divided into three distinct phases, each characterized by different governmental policies. First came the Mujib dictatorship, followed by the military regime, and finally, democratic rule.

➤ Under Mujib's leadership, a democratic system was established in Bangladesh, with the core principles of nationalism, socialism, democracy, and secularism proclaimed. Equal rights were guaranteed to all members of society regardless of language or religion. Secular culture was entrusted with the responsibility of representing the cultural identity of the community. Mujib advocated for a non-capitalist economic system, aiming for the progress of all societal groups, not just a privileged few. The democratic movement led by Mujib attracted participants from various social classes and religious backgrounds, including intellectuals, peasants, and laborers, Muslims, Hindus, and Christians. This movement was characterized by its pan-Bengali nature (Chakravarty, 1995).

➤ Zia significantly altered the secular nature of the Bangladesh constitution to Islamize the country's social and political framework. The first amendment to the Constitution introduced "Bismillah-er-Rahman-a-Rahim" (in the name of Allah, the Merciful and Generous) at the beginning of the constitution. This practice continues to be followed by leaders and supporters of the BNP. Zia also removed Article 12 of the constitution, which had ensured the implementation of secularist principles. Furthermore, under his military dictatorship, Zia amended Article 8(1) of the original constitution, which had declared secularism as the guiding principle of state policy.

During the Zia dictatorship, efforts were made to regulate political parties through the issuance of the Political Parties Regulation in 1976. This move inadvertently benefited religious groups, leading to increased insecurity among religious minority groups. As a result, achieving the same level of religious freedom as the majority population became more challenging for minority communities.

As religion increasingly influenced politics, minority representation in politics dwindled. This underrepresentation relative to their numbers left minority communities vulnerable to mistreatment by the majority. Such policies empowered Islamic extremists to target religious minorities more aggressively. Consequently, Hindus continued to migrate to India seeking safety. Despite appeals from organizations like the Bangladesh Hindu-Christian Buddha Oikya Parishad to halt assaults on minority populations nationwide, successive governments failed to take action.

General Ershad resolved his legitimacy concerns by adopting the practices of his predecessor military dictator and integrating religion into political discourse upon seizing state power. He founded the Jatiya Party with support from military officials, government servants, and political leaders. In a religious gathering in Barisal in March 1988, Ershad announced plans to introduce legislation declaring Islam as the state religion of Bangladesh, a move aimed at appeasing Muslim extremists, particularly the Jamaat-e-Islami. This marked the beginning of Bangladesh's transition into an Islamic republic (Chitkara, 1997). The eighth constitutional amendment, enacted in 1988 under his administration, officially declared Islam as the state religion, while ensuring the peaceful practice of other religions in the republic (Samad, 2007).

Following Ershad's ousting, Khaleda Zia assumed office as prime minister, continuing the policies of her predecessor without significant alterations. Her administration maintained the Islamization policies initiated by Zia and Ershad, rather than introducing any substantial changes. In a bid to expand her support base, Khaleda Zia's government collaborated with religious institutions, further entrenching its ties with Islam (Chitkara, 1997). Additionally, Prime Minister Khaleda Zia cultivated strong

connections with Islamic groups, despite their outlawed status (Samander and Barun, 1997). Consequently, the democratic and secular vision upon which Bangladesh was founded gradually eroded. Since the assassination of Mujibur Rahman, politicians in Bangladesh have exploited Islam, as well as anti-Indian and anti-Hindu sentiments, as key electoral strategies.

Following the implementation of the 8th Amendment, the safety of religious minorities was severely compromised. Between 1989 and 1992, there were numerous large-scale attacks against minorities, accompanied by the seizure of lands as enemy property. In response to escalating concerns, the BNP administration issued a statement on November 4, 1993, calling for a review of the census of enemy properties. This move was primarily aimed at preventing the persecution and harassment of Bangladeshi religious minorities under the Act (Bhowmik, 1998). However, these directives from the BNP government could be interpreted as attempts to suppress religious minorities.

In the 1996 general election, the Awami League (AL) party secured the majority of seats, marking its return to power after a prolonged period. Sheikh Hasina emerged as the sole figure to establish the central government. Despite being ostensibly secular, the AL party aligned itself with Islamist organizations during this time. Islamic parties disseminated literature widely through various publications, journals, and newspapers under Hasina's administration. Notably, when Taslima Nasreen attempted to visit her dying mother, the Hasina government compelled her to leave, exposing its true nature as depicted in Nasreen's book "Lajja." Despite electoral promises outlined in their manifestos, the Awami League has largely failed to earn the trust of minority communities. Additionally, the party has faltered in standing firm with minorities in ensuring their protection and security.

The BNP's coalition administration included highly religious political groups such as Jamaat-e-Islami, the Jatiya Party, and Islami Oikkyo Jote. Upon assuming power, these parties began to propagate against the country's pluralistic culture. Their specific aim was to establish a theocratic regime in Bangladesh, aiming to erase its diverse cultural traditions. Following the general election in October 2001, violence and

crimes were perpetrated against minority populations in Bangladesh, particularly targeting women and young girls. National newspapers extensively reported on the atrocities, including torture and repression. The BNP's actions primarily focused on the seizure of Hindu properties, the vandalism of Hindu temples, arson attacks on residences, and the rape and murder of minority individuals (Sayeed, 2006).

Policies relating to Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT)

The majority of tribal Buddhists reside in the districts of Rangamati, Khagrachari, and Bandarban, encompassing the 13,295 square kilometers of the CHT in Bangladesh. Bangladesh's southern region shares borders with the Indian states of Tripura and Mizoram, as well as the Arakan and Chin States of Burma. Thirteen indigenous groups have inhabited the CHT for generations. Prior to British colonization, the Jumma people like many other indigenous populations worldwide, enjoyed autonomy. However, in 1860, the CHT region came under colonial control, leading to the establishment of an independent administrative territory known as "the Chittagong Hill Tracts." Despite this, their political system, culture, and social structure were preserved to some extent. Administrative reforms were implemented when the Chittagong Hill Tracts became a distinct and autonomous district, having previously been part of the Chittagong District (Wolfgang, 1981).

➤ **Program for Population Transfer**

President Ziaur Rahman initiated the official settlement of non-CHT citizens, primarily Bengali Muslims, into the CHT. The government pledged to provide these settlers with various resources, including land, grants, money, and other supplies. To implement this, the government gradually relocated landless Bengali families to government-owned "khas" or reserved land in the CHT area. In the initial phase, it was agreed to relocate 30,000 households, each receiving five acres of land along with initial financial assistance. The second phase, commencing in August 1980, distributed either four acres of lower-quality land or 2.5 acres of arable land to each family (Roy, 2000).

➤ **Military development in the CHT**

The government has militarized the CHT region in an attempt to suppress insurgency there, resulting in daily interactions between CHT residents and military personnel. Military soldiers have been granted the authority to stop and search individuals or homes at any moment they deem necessary, becoming a routine part of everyday socioeconomic life for the common citizen. The issue of indigenous people being displaced from their lands has been further exacerbated by the CHT's counterinsurgency campaign. Prior to the Peace Accord, illegal leases totaling 1,871 acres of property and 25-acre sections amounting to 46,775 acres of "khas" land were granted in the CHT. These leases were predominantly obtained by outside industrialists, businesses, and civil and military authorities, with the lands being seized without providing any compensation to the indigenous population (Roy, 2000).

➤ **Constitutional Provisions Regarding CHT Land**

At present, the state holds ownership over nearly all the property in the CHT region, including reserve forests managed by the Forest Department and Unclassified State Forests (USF) overseen by civil administration. The "common lands" historically utilized by the Hill peoples for various activities such as homesteads, widening farming, plough cultivation, and other land- and forest-based extractive practices are situated within the USF areas. However, these USF regions are viewed as state-owned (khas) territory by government officials and can be reclaimed at their discretion.

➤ **The Situation of CHT Residents**

The Hill people are legally regarded as squatters on their own ancestral lands, as per Burns and Loffler (1990). Interest groups wielding influence over state power have exploited this legal loophole to justify the eviction of indigenous communities from USF lands.

Evictions and land confiscations remain rampant in the CHT, making land the most pressing issue in the region. Resolving the land question is crucial for maintaining peace in the CHT. In 2013 alone, 3,992 acres of land were seized by various entities including the forest

department, elites, and security forces. Land-related disputes resulted in 111 instances of homes being burned down in 2011, and another 36 in 2013. Despite the peace agreement, 26 households and 13 families were forcibly displaced from their ancestral lands in 2013 (Maitrot and Chakma, 2017).

Barriers to Representation

The historical underrepresentation of minorities in public institutions such as the police, military, and civil bureaucracy poses a significant obstacle to minorities seeking justice. Moreover, justice is often hindered by poverty and marginalization, further exacerbating the challenges faced by minorities. As a result, members of minority religious groups often find themselves at the lowest rungs of the socioeconomic ladder, with limited access to political resources to address injustices perpetrated against them.

Religious minorities continue to be underrepresented in politics and state agencies, although there are some indications of progress towards greater inclusion. Despite the appointment of several minority members to senior positions, such as the historic appointment of the first Hindu chief justice in the Supreme Court in January 2015, challenges persist. Nevertheless, there have been positive developments, such as the current parliament including the highest number of Hindu parliamentarians in the nation's history—14 members. This represents a notable increase compared to previous years, with six in 1991, five in 1996, three in 2001, and ten in 2008.

Despite some progress, the representation of religious minorities in parliament remains disproportionately low, constituting only 4% of the current parliamentary composition, a fraction of their overall national population share. Hindu MPs have historically been affiliated with a single party, predominantly the AL, with only one exception since 1991. In addition to Hindu representation, there is currently only one Christian Member of Parliament, a native Garo elected to the AL in July 2016, and two native Buddhists. However, there are no active measures in place to address the underrepresentation of minorities in parliament, underscoring the ongoing marginalization of religious minorities by

Bangladesh's mainstream politicians ("Minority Rights Group International", 2016).

Minority Public Representation

While the constitution of Bangladesh guarantees equal rights to all citizens regardless of caste, sex, religion, or place of birth, systemic issues can lead to injustices. For instance, the majoritarian democratic system does not afford religious minorities' significant representation in the national Parliament. Given the constraints of the current electoral system and the polarized political climate, meaningful minority representation in Parliament is unlikely without affirmative action. The Parliament comprises 300 members, and over the years, the representation of minorities, particularly minority women, has been minimal. For example, the BNP nominated one minority woman in 1991, the Jatiyo Party nominated one in 1986, the AL nominated two in 1996, the BNP nominated one in 2008, and the AL nominated one in 2012. In 1973, the AL only nominated one minority woman. This lack of representation is also evident in the composition of various governments, with only one member of the minority group in the 48-member BNP government formed in 1991, and four members from underrepresented groups in the 54-member 2018 AL cabinet.

The 2018 BCS Exam serves as a notable example of this disparity, particularly within the state's executive branch. Minority representation is often scarce in hiring committees for government positions. Concerns have been raised regarding discriminatory practices during the viva voce phase, where board members of the PSC allegedly pose unwelcome questions and behave rudely toward non-Muslim candidates. A recent investigation revealed that out of approximately 3,197 appointments in various government sectors, which included Hindus, Buddhists, and Christians, only around 10.45 percent were from minority communities, with 5 percent attributed to the tribal quota.

Currently, there are only two members of minority groups employed at the Dhaka headquarters of the Foreign Service. In the Bangladesh Army, there are a few non-Muslim commissioned officers, including two Hindus and one Chakma, who hold major general positions. Additionally, there are two to three

Brigadier Generals in each of the Army Medical Corps and Army Education Corps who are non-Muslims. However, one notable exception within the public sector is the government-owned Bangladesh Bank, where approximately 10% of senior positions are held by non-Muslim employees.

Political behavior and community size play crucial roles in determining election outcomes, especially under a first-past-the-post parliamentary system like that in Britain. In such systems, approximately 30-35 percent of the votes are typically needed to secure a seat, and securing 40 percent of the votes can often translate into winning 50 to 60 percent of the legislative seats. In Bangladesh, minorities constitute less than 11% of the total electorate. However, in 50 out of the 300 parliamentary seats, they represent more than 20% of the electorate. Furthermore, minorities make up between 10% and 50% of the voters in 197 seats, and more than 50% in an additional six seats. Given their voting patterns, minorities emerge as a significant determinant of election outcomes in approximately 20% of parliamentary seats (Amin et al., 2016).

Socio-Economic Status

In 1961, Hindus comprised nearly 18.5 percent of East Pakistan's population. However, over the subsequent decade, their percentage declined significantly due to a continuous exodus of people leaving the country. This emigration was encouraged by Pakistan's instability and was hastened by communal unrest in the early 1960s. By March 1971, when Bangladesh gained independence, Hindus constituted just around 13.5 percent of the overall population, according to estimates (Mundhe, 2017).

With a few notable exceptions, the socio-economic profile of Bangladesh's ethnic minority communities is concerning. These communities often include some of the country's most impoverished individuals. They tend to have limited access to education and healthcare, reflecting a lack of social awareness on these crucial issues. Additionally, racial discrimination, illness, inadequate nutrition, and poor hygiene are prevalent among these populations, contributing to their overall disadvantaged status (Barkat et al., 2009a, 2009b; Roy, 2012).

In recent years, Bangladesh has made significant progress in alleviating severe poverty. Between 2010 and 2014, the percentage of the population classified as extremely poor decreased from 17.6% to 12.4%. However, ethnic minorities have only partially shared in this achievement. In Greater Sylhet and Mymensingh, where ten plains-land ethnic communities reside, around 60% of ethnic minority residents live in abject poverty, compared to 39.5% of rural Bengalis. Moreover, regardless of ancestry, 62% of households in the CHT region are living in absolute poverty, with 36% considered extremely poor (Barkat et al., 2009b; Chakma and Maitrot, 2016; Sen and Ali, 2015).

Despite the significant progress Bangladesh has made in achieving Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), a considerable portion of the ethnic minority population continues to be denied access to fundamental socioeconomic rights such as education, healthcare, food security, clean drinking water, and electricity. While the country has made remarkable strides in primary school enrollment, gender parity in education, maternal and child mortality rates, immunization coverage, and reduction of communicable diseases, ethnic minority populations in Bangladesh still lag behind in achieving these goals. Particularly vulnerable are the ethnic minority communities in the CHT region of south and eastern Bangladesh, where they face frequent challenges including flash floods, landslides, monsoon storms, and precarious livelihoods (Roy & Chakma, 2015; Barau et al., 2019).

The Origins of the Enemy Property Act and Its Consequences

The enemy property legislation in Bangladesh holds substantial socioeconomic implications, as it affects land ownership and stability within the society. Conversely, social stability influences internal security and, consequently, economic growth and the overall well-being of individuals and communities (Bandyopadhyay, 2004). The vested property rules in Bangladesh are widely regarded as a significant factor contributing to various socioeconomic challenges faced by minority groups. These discriminatory laws, regulations, and ordinances, initially introduced by the Pakistani government and later continued

by the Bangladeshi government, have had a lasting impact on the property rights of the Hindu religious minority population. It all began with the enactment of the East Bengal (Emergency) Requisition of Property Act XIII of 1948, followed by subsequent laws and directives that gradually affected the property ownership of the Hindu minority community (Barkat, 1997).

Following the enactment of the Enemy Vested Property (Continuance of Emergency Provisions) Act, 1974, Hindus experienced significant economic hardships. According to research conducted by Ruchira Joshi on the "Situation of Minority in Bangladesh," nearly one million Hindu homeowners saw approximately 1.64 million acres of landed property confiscated. Various political parties, including the BNP (20%), Muslim League (44%), Awami League (17%), Jatiyo Party (5%), and Jammate-Islami (1%), were involved in the appropriation of Hindu community property. Despite its purportedly secular stance, even the Awami League was implicated in seizing assets belonging to the Hindu minority (Sing, 2003). The VPA has had a widespread impact, affecting approximately 10,483,908 families, although government estimates often understate this figure. It has been particularly impactful on the Hindu community, affecting 10 out of every 34 Hindus, which amounts to around 30% of all Hindus, including those who are unaccounted for. The harsh enforcement of the Enemy Property Act (EPA) and the VPA has been cited as the primary reason for the forced migration of Hindus from Bangladesh to nearby Indian states. According to ALRD, between 1964 and 1991 alone, an estimated 10 million such migrants sought refuge worldwide.

Thanks to the Sheikh Hasina administration for making a resolution about the vital Enemy Property Act issue. The Vested Property Act would no longer be in effect, the Bangladeshi government determined during its cabinet meeting on September 9, 2009. On November 29, 2011, the Bangladeshi parliament enacted a historic measure that would allow the restitution of property taken from minorities. Through the law, victims are now qualified to recover their misplaced property via legal means (Mundhe, 2017).

The resolution made by the Sheikh Hasina administration regarding the crucial issue of the EPA is indeed commendable. During its cabinet meeting on September 9, 2009, the Bangladeshi government decided that the VPA would no longer be in effect. This decision marked a significant step towards addressing the grievances of minorities who had suffered due to property seizures. Subsequently, on November 29, 2011, the Bangladeshi parliament passed a historic legislation allowing for the restitution of property taken from minorities. This law provides a legal pathway for victims to reclaim their lost property, representing a positive move towards justice and reconciliation (Mundhe, 2017).

Minority Communities and Human Rights Violations

Minority communities' generally still harbor feelings of insecurity and apprehension. This sentiment stems from enduring structural issues that cultivate and sustain a climate of dominance and intolerance towards minorities. Reports in numerous national publications frequently highlight instances of violence perpetrated against minority groups, further exacerbating these fears and concerns.

➤ Violence against Women

The fight for women's empowerment often clashes with the harsh reality of their vulnerability. Minority women face a particularly brutal situation, where violence against them becomes an attack on the entire community. News reports paint a horrifying picture, filled with acts of rape, acid attacks, harassment, and torture. The sheer savagery is evident: wives assaulted in front of their husbands, mothers targeted before their children, and even horrific gang rapes of mothers and daughters together. These reports often implicate members of the ruling party as perpetrators, further chilling the victims' ability to seek justice. Fear of retribution leaves many women too terrified to come forward (Mundhe, 2017).

➤ Violation to Religious Rights

While Islam is the state religion of Bangladesh, the constitution guarantees freedom of religion for all residents. However, this principle seems to be inconsistently applied, as religious

minorities continue to face challenges in practicing their faith. In 2002 alone, news reports documented 147 attacks on 36 Hindu religious institutions. These incidents included the destruction or damage of household deities, temples, and property related to religious celebrations. This paints a concerning picture of the reality faced by some religious minorities in Bangladesh (Mandal, n.d.).

➤ **Loss of Land Rights**

The VPA, which allowed confiscation of land from those deemed enemies of the state, disproportionately impacted Hindu minorities. Although repealed in 2000, its full implementation remains stalled. Ethnic minorities in the CHT face a similar struggle. Government land purchases and Bengali settlement programs have alienated them from their ancestral lands and resources. Even after six years of a peace accord, the Land Commission, crucial for resolving land disputes, has yet to function effectively (Mundhe, 2017).

➤ **Attacks on Life and Property**

Religious and ethnic minorities in Bangladesh are subjected to a range of horrific harassment tactics, including physical assaults, looting, arson, and even acid attacks. About 75 acts of looting and 27 cases of burning property belonging to minority populations were reported in newspapers. Attacks on people's lives occurred in 66 occurrences, including incidences of acid throwing. Perpetrators often enjoy the backing of powerful figures, leaving victims with little hope for justice. In some cases, accusations against attackers have even triggered further violence (Mandal, n.d.).

➤ **Forceful Conversion to Islam**

Though less prevalent than in the past, forced conversions of minority women in Bangladesh remain a persistent issue. These abductions can take various forms, occurring sporadically across the country. Minority women are the primary targets, often subjected to threats, intimidation, and even financial incentives to coerce conversion. Local criminals, known as "mastans," sometimes actively participate in these kidnappings. Refusal to comply with demands for money, often from powerful figures within the ruling party or local community, can

trigger violence. These rejections often enrage perpetrators, leading to rampages that inflict harm on individuals and property belonging to minorities.

Conclusion

Bangladesh's treatment of minorities exposes a critical human rights issue. Despite the nation's democratic framework, minorities face a harsh reality. Social, economic, and political marginalization leaves them feeling excluded from the true benefits of democracy. While the constitution protects the Muslim majority, it fails to acknowledge or safeguard cultural and racial minorities. Political actors exploit religion to bolster their power, neglecting the nation's multi-ethnic makeup. To move forward, Bangladesh's elected officials must recognize this reality and amend the constitution to reflect the country's diverse population, ensuring equal rights and protections for all.

Bangladesh's minorities will only see true progress when fundamental rights enshrined in the constitution and the UN Human Rights Declaration is fully enforced. Achieving societal racial peace requires not just legal changes, but also the government's genuine commitment. Cultivating a culture of respect and tolerance is essential. Bangladesh is a tapestry woven from diverse communities - Hindus, Chakmas, Garos, Malos, Santhals - all of whom have contributed significantly to the nation's development. Their sacrifices during the liberation struggle and their ongoing contributions deserve recognition and inclusion in Bangladesh's national narrative.

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