

PERSECUTION AND RESILIENCE: HUMAN RIGHTS OF HINDU COMMUNITIES IN BANGLADESH

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Abstract

This research explores the intricate dynamics of persecution and resilience experienced by Hindu communities in Bangladesh, focusing on their human rights challenges. As a religious minority in a predominantly Muslim nation, Bangladeshi Hindus have historically faced various forms of discrimination, violence, and socio-political marginalization. This study delves into the patterns of human rights violations against Hindus, including land confiscation, forced conversions, and communal violence. It also examines the legal and institutional frameworks intended to protect minority rights, assessing their effectiveness and the gaps that allow ongoing persecution. Moreover, the research highlights the resilience and adaptive strategies employed by Hindu communities to preserve their cultural identity and secure their rights in an often-hostile environment. Through a combination of qualitative interviews, case studies, and analysis of legal documents, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the current human rights situation of Hindus in Bangladesh. It also offers recommendations for policy reforms and advocacy efforts to enhance the protection of minority rights, promoting a more inclusive and equitable society.

Key Words: Persecution, Resilience, Human Rights, Minority Rights, Discrimination, Bangladeshi Hindus, Ethno-Religious Conflict.

INTRODUCTION

The Hindu community in Bangladesh, constituting a significant religious minority, has long been subjected to various forms of persecution and human rights violations. Despite the nation's constitutional promise of equality and protection for all citizens, the Hindu population has faced systematic discrimination, violence, and socio-economic marginalization. These challenges are deeply rooted in the historical, political, and social fabric of Bangladesh, dating back to the partition of India in 1947 and the subsequent creation of Bangladesh in 1971. The legacy of communal tensions has continued to affect the Hindu minority, manifesting in numerous incidents of violence, forced conversions,

land confiscations, and legal discrimination. This study aims to explore the complex dynamics of persecution faced by Hindu communities in Bangladesh and the resilience they have demonstrated in the face of such adversity. It will delve into the various forms of human rights abuses inflicted upon these communities, including physical violence, destruction of religious sites, and socio-economic disenfranchisement. Additionally, the study will examine the legal frameworks and institutional responses to these violations, assessing their adequacy and effectiveness in protecting the rights of Hindu minorities. In parallel, this research will highlight the strategies of resilience employed by the Hindu community, showcasing their efforts to preserve their cultural identity, secure their rights, and sustain their way of life amidst adversity. By analysing both the challenges and the responses of the Hindu community, the study seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of their situation and contribute to the broader discourse on minority rights and human rights in South Asia. Ultimately, the research aims to offer insights and recommendations for strengthening the protection of minority rights in Bangladesh, fostering a more inclusive and just society.

The Hindu communities in Bangladesh have faced various forms of persecution over the decades, often rooted in religious and ethnic discrimination. These forms of persecution range from physical violence to systemic socio-economic marginalization.

1. Communal Violence and Mob Attacks

Hindu minorities in Bangladesh have faced significant challenges and periodic violence, often in the form of mob attacks, property destruction, and communal clashes. These attacks, while not continuous, tend to surge during times of political unrest, religious festivals, or allegations of blasphemy. The targeting of Hindus, who make up about 8-10% of Bangladesh's population, highlights the vulnerabilities of religious minorities in the country. In 2013, after the International Crimes Tribunal sentenced a Jamaat-e-Islami leader to death for war crimes committed during the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War, violent protests erupted. Hindu communities in the Satkhira district were particularly targeted, with their homes, businesses, and temples attacked. More than 50 Hindu houses and several temples were destroyed in these communal riots.

Nasirnagar Violence, 2016 case is famous. "In October 2016, the Nasirnagar sub-district in Brahmanbaria experienced severe communal violence. The violence erupted following the circulation of a Facebook post by a Hindu fisherman, which allegedly insulted Islam. The post led to widespread outrage among the Muslim majority, culminating in mob attacks on Hindu households and temples. Over 200 Hindu homes were looted and damaged, and 17 temples were vandalized. Despite the large scale of the violence, law enforcement agencies

were slow to respond, and many attackers were never brought to justice. The investigation into the Nasirnagar incident was heavily criticized for its sluggish pace and lack of thoroughness. The accused were either acquitted or faced minimal consequences, highlighting the impunity often enjoyed by perpetrators of communal violence against minorities in Bangladesh.”

The Bangladeshi government has condemned such attacks and taken steps to provide security to minorities, but critics argue that the response is often too slow or inadequate. Activists call for stronger protection measures, legal reforms, and efforts to promote interfaith harmony to ensure the safety of minority communities. The plight of Hindus in Bangladesh underscores the need for more robust protections for religious minorities and better accountability for perpetrators of communal violence.

2. Forced Conversion and Abduction

Forced conversion and abduction of Hindu women and girls in Bangladesh have become alarming human rights concerns, particularly affecting the minority Hindu population. Victims, often minors, are abducted, coerced into converting to Islam, and forcibly married off to their abductors, stripping them of their religious and personal identities. These incidents are more frequent in rural areas, where Hindu families have limited access to legal protection and face societal pressure not to pursue justice.

“One of the most prominent cases is the 2020 abduction of Puja Mandal, a 14-year-old Hindu girl from Khulna, who was forcibly taken from her home, converted to Islam, and married to her abductor. Despite the family’s efforts to seek legal recourse, the investigation was delayed, and the family faced intimidation and pressure to drop the case. This pattern of delayed or ineffective legal responses is common in cases of forced conversion, as local authorities often fail to act swiftly or adequately.”

While Bangladesh's Constitution guarantees the protection of religious minorities, the reality is that Hindu families face considerable obstacles in securing justice. These incidents illustrate broader issues of systemic discrimination and religious intolerance, underscoring the urgent need for stronger legal protections and accountability mechanisms.

3. Land Grabbing and Property Seizure

The Bangladeshi parliament has passed a landmark bill that will enable the return of property seized from the country's Hindu minority. The land was taken under a controversial law enacted in the 1960s. It was implemented by the East Pakistan administration before Bangladesh became independent in 1971. “The law, initially known as the Enemy Property Act, allowed the authorities to take over land and buildings of

Hindus who migrated to India.” Under its terms, property belonging to millions of Hindus who fled to India was confiscated. Actually, the law came into effect in 1965 when Pakistan and India fought a brief war. The act was renamed as the Vested Properties Act after independence. The Vested Properties Return (Amendment) Bill 2011 now enables Hindus to reclaim their property taken over by the government and individuals. In this context Supreme Court lawyer Subrata Chowdhury told that ““There are some good provisions but it doesn't go far enough to address our demand that all the properties seized or taken over until recently should be returned to their rightful owners,”

The Vested Property Act, originally known as the Enemy Property Act, allowed the Bangladeshi government to seize properties owned by individuals deemed as ‘enemies of the state.’ In practice, this act disproportionately affected Hindu families, many of whom lost their ancestral lands. “Dr. Paritosh Mondal, a prominent Hindu landowner in Chittagong, had his properties seized under the Vested Property Act in the 1990s. Despite having legal documentation proving ownership, Dr. Mondal’s attempts to reclaim his property through the courts were unsuccessful due to bureaucratic delays and alleged corruption. The legal battle extended for over two decades, with the courts providing no definitive resolution. In 2001, the government introduced the Vested Property Return Act, which aimed to return confiscated properties, but the implementation has been inconsistent, and many affected Hindus, including Dr. Mondal, have yet to see their properties returned.”

According to Hindu community leaders a general exodus are that ‘even after the independence of Bangladesh in 1971 the law was still used to discriminate against them. Human rights groups and civil society activists have long urged successive governments to repeal the act. The governing Awami League made an electoral promise in 2008 that confiscated properties would be given back to the original owners. Experts say that while the changes to the law are welcome, it will be impossible to return all the land because some of it was confiscated more than 40 years ago.” Most of it appears to have been taken over by Muslims with links to the main political parties. The government says that it will soon publish a list of properties that were seized. It that any Hindus wanting to make a claim will have 90 days to do so. It is estimated by one prominent academic that about 400 to 500 Hindu people are migrating daily from Bangladesh. Professor AbulBarkat told the BBC that if the current rate continues, Bangladesh will no longer have a Hindu community in 25 years' time.”

4. Destruction of Religious Sites

Attacks on Hindu temples and other religious sites are a common form of persecution, aimed at eroding the cultural and religious identity of Hindu communities. These attacks

often occur during times of political unrest or following accusations of blasphemy against Hindu individuals. According to the Newspaper Hindus and Hindu Temples were attacked severally in Bangladesh. There have been many religious attacks on Hindus in the following decades. “A Bangladeshi human rights group, Ain o Salish Kendra, reported at least 3,679 attacks on the Hindu community between January 2013 and September 2021, including vandalism, arson and targeted violence.” In following decades mob attacks on Hindu minority households and temples in Bangladesh during and after Durga Puja, the country’s biggest Hindu festival, rights group Amnesty International said: "Such repeated attacks against individuals, communal violence and destruction of the homes and places of worship of minorities in Bangladesh over the years show that the state has failed in its duty to protect minorities."

5. Social and Economic Marginalization

The marginalized communities in Bangladesh have always been and still are subjected to severe socio-economic discriminations. In other words, they are largely deprived of and excluded from having access to many basic services, such as health, education and social security. Their employment opportunities are very limited, and their social identity and status are very low. They are quite often displaced forcefully from their own land. These groups are victims of rights violation such as discrimination, violence, humiliation, threats and oppression. Their demands are often ignored by the policymakers, politicians and even by the mainstream population.

The marginalized people in Bangladesh are not homogenous; rather largely diverse in terms of culture, religion, profession, identity, ethnicity, and physical and social dimensions. There are number of groups who are conspicuously different from each other due to occupational condition (e.g. Dalits, Harijan, fisher-folk, sex-workers), minority situation (e.g. religion, caste, or ethnicity), dwelling in extreme vulnerable or hard to reach areas (e.g. char, haor or hill areas), disability, sexual orientation, gender identity including transgenders, etc. The human rights situation of different marginalised communities remains serious; but the government and non- government responses against these problems are inadequate.

Hindus in Bangladesh often face systemic discrimination in education, employment, and access to public services. This marginalization is compounded by their minority status, leading to socio-economic disenfranchisement and limiting their opportunities for advancement. Education and Employment Discrimination Reports have documented instances where Hindu students and job applicants have been discriminated against due to their religion. For example, “A 2018 incident report by the Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist

Christian Unity Council highlighted that Hindu candidates often face discrimination during the recruitment process for public sector jobs. This is further exacerbated by the lack of affirmative action policies to address such disparities. While there have been attempts to address employment discrimination through various legal and administrative measures, implementation has been weak. The lack of robust anti-discrimination laws means that many cases of discrimination go unreported or unresolved”

6. Resilience and Struggle of Hindu Communities in Bangladesh

Despite enduring decades of persecution, the Hindu communities in Bangladesh have shown remarkable resilience in preserving their cultural, religious, and social identity. These communities, though a religious minority, have maintained their traditions and safeguarded their heritage through sustained efforts in the face of violence, discrimination, and socio-political challenges. One of the key expressions of their resilience has been the rebuilding of temples that were destroyed during periods of communal violence. Temples are central to Hindu religious and social life, and the act of restoring these structures symbolizes not only physical reconstruction but also the re-establishment of their spiritual presence and community pride. By continuing to organize religious festivals like Durga Puja, Kali Puja, and Diwali, the Hindu population has reaffirmed its cultural identity, even as such gatherings sometimes attract hostility and threats.

Community organizations have played a critical role in fostering unity among the Hindu minority. These groups work to protect the rights of Hindus, provide legal support, and advocate for social and economic inclusion. Local leaders and grassroots movements have taken up the challenge of ensuring that their community’s voice is heard in national dialogues, particularly when it comes to issues of religious freedom and protection under the law. In addition to their internal efforts, Hindu leaders have increasingly turned to the international stage to seek support and raise awareness about their plight. These organizations and activists have brought cases of forced conversions, land seizures, and religiously motivated attacks to the attention of global human rights organizations, hoping to pressure the Bangladeshi government and the international community to take meaningful action.

Furthermore, the Hindu community's struggle is not only about survival but also about reclaiming their dignity in a country where they have long contributed to the cultural fabric.

Despite being economically marginalized and often politically underrepresented, they continue to contribute to the nation in fields like education, business, and the arts. Their endurance reflects a deep commitment to their heritage and unwillingness to let their history

be erased. This struggle for resilience against systemic oppression speaks to their broader fight for recognition, equal rights, and security. The community's efforts to highlight their situation internationally, by engaging with global human rights platforms, have gradually helped bring their issues to light, drawing attention to their ongoing battle for dignity, justice, and freedom within Bangladesh.

7. Indian government steps for Hindus in Bangladesh.

The Indian government has historically expressed concern over the persecution of Hindus in Bangladesh and taken several steps, both diplomatically and through legal provisions, to support the Hindu minority. While India's direct influence in Bangladesh's internal affairs is limited, it has played a role through international diplomacy, regional cooperation, and the creation of legal frameworks to assist persecuted minorities, including Hindus from Bangladesh. Below are key actions and legal provisions taken by the Indian Government:

A. Diplomatic Engagement and Bilateral Relations

India has consistently raised the issue of the safety and security of the Hindu minority in Bangladesh during high-level diplomatic discussions. The Indian government emphasizes the protection of religious minorities in Bangladesh through diplomatic channels and regional forums like the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). For Example: "India regularly raises concerns over attacks on Hindus during diplomatic meetings. For instance, after the communal violence in Nasirnagar in 2016, the Indian government issued a statement condemning the attacks and expressed concern to Bangladesh's government regarding the protection of its minority population."

B. Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), 2019

The Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), 2019 is a landmark legal provision introduced by the Indian government to provide citizenship to persecuted minorities, including Hindus, from Bangladesh. The act allows Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis, and Christians from Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan who faced religious persecution and entered India before December 31, 2014, to apply for Indian citizenship. The law is seen as a direct response to the historical persecution faced by these communities, including Hindus in Bangladesh.

Legal Provision in CAA says that "The CAA amended the Citizenship Act of 1955 to facilitate the process of granting Indian citizenship to religiously persecuted minorities from neighbouring countries. Under this provision, people from these communities are not treated as illegal immigrants, which were the case previously, and they are eligible for Indian citizenship after five years of residence in India (as opposed to the standard 11 years)."

But the CAA has faced criticism domestically and internationally for excluding Muslim refugees and being discriminatory based on religion. However, its supporters argue that it offers necessary protection to religious minorities who have historically faced persecution in neighbouring countries.

C. Rehabilitation and Resettlement Initiatives

In some instances, the Indian government has assisted displaced Hindus from Bangladesh by providing resettlement and rehabilitation support. Several Indian states, particularly those bordering Bangladesh, have facilitated the settlement of refugees fleeing communal violence or persecution. In reference of this context “The Indian government has set up refugee camps in states like West Bengal, Assam, and Tripura, where persecuted Bangladeshi Hindus have sought refuge. These camps provide shelter, food, and basic necessities for Hindu refugees while they await legal processing under provisions like the CAA.”

D. Regional Cooperation and Advocacy for Minority Rights

India has used regional and international platforms to advocate for minority rights in Bangladesh, especially in cases of communal violence and religious intolerance. “The Indian government has frequently raised the issue of protecting Hindu minorities during SAARC meetings and UN human rights forums.”¹⁴ As we can say “India has raised concerns over religious violence targeting Hindus in Bangladesh at international forums like the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC), urging Bangladesh to uphold its commitments to protect minorities as part of international human rights conventions.”

Thus India’s steps to support Hindus in Bangladesh include diplomatic efforts, legal frameworks like the CAA, the provision of long-term visas, and rehabilitation initiatives. Through these measures, the Indian government has aimed to provide sanctuary and support to persecuted Bangladeshi Hindus, while also advocating for their protection on international platforms.

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

Hindu communities in Bangladesh face a wide range of persecution, including communal violence, forced conversions, land grabbing, destruction of religious sites, and socio-economic marginalization. These forms of persecution are deeply entrenched and systemic, affecting the community's social, economic, and political rights.

Mob attacks against Hindus, especially during religious festivals or political unrest, have been a recurring issue. The Nasirnagar Violence in 2016, where over 200 Hindu homes and 17 temples were vandalized, highlights the impunity of perpetrators and the slow response from law enforcement.

Hindu women and girls are particularly vulnerable to forced conversions and abductions, where they are coerced into converting to Islam and marrying their abductors. The case of Puja Mandal in 2020 exemplifies the challenges Hindu families face in securing justice.

The Vested Property Act (formerly the Enemy Property Act) disproportionately affected Hindu families by seizing their ancestral lands. Though the Vested Property Return Act of 2011 was introduced to return confiscated lands, its implementation has been inconsistent.

Hindu temples and religious sites have been frequent targets of vandalism and destruction, especially during times of communal unrest. Over 3,600 attacks on Hindu sites were reported between 2013 and 2021.

Hindu communities face discrimination in access to education, employment, and public services, limiting their socio-economic mobility. Discrimination in public sector employment is a notable example

Despite ongoing persecution, Hindu communities have demonstrated resilience by rebuilding temples, organizing festivals, and advocating for their rights both domestically and internationally.

CONCLUSION

Hindu communities in Bangladesh remain vulnerable to various forms of persecution, including violence, forced conversions, and land seizures, which have been ongoing despite legal provisions and government assurances. Although legal mechanisms like the Vested Property Return Act and constitutional guarantees exist, their implementation remains inadequate. The slow response from authorities and lack of accountability perpetuate the cycle of persecution. Despite the challenges, the Hindu community continues to display resilience, preserving their culture and religious identity through communal efforts, legal advocacy, and international engagement. Strengthening legal protections for religious minorities and improving the enforcement of existing laws are essential to safeguard the rights of Hindus in Bangladesh. Additionally, more robust international advocacy and pressure may help ensure accountability and long-term solutions for these vulnerable communities.

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