

# Violence against the Minorities in Bangladesh

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## Abstract

Violent attacks on religious minorities in recent days have evoked popular protests at home and abroad, and the minority community thinks it is an attempt to force them to leave the country like in 1971. They fear the extent of the dreadfulness of attacks on the minorities might exceed what they had seen during 2001 and appealed to the international community apart from the political parties to look into the matter seriously. The situation of minorities in Bangladesh is a human rights issue. Status of minorities all over the world has demonstrated a pattern of discrimination and insecurity. Bangladesh is no exception. However, the example of minorities in Bangladesh has a typical trend. The seeds of violence against the minority community are inherent within the structures of the modern system which has turned human beings into vote banks and vote constituencies. Lack of accountability and transparency of the state machinery only makes the situation worse. Bangladesh ought to recognize the plurality of its culture and people. Undoubtedly, civil society has the major and the most important role to play in this respect. This paper contains the theoretical explanation of the concept of “minority” in general and then examines the state of minorities in Bangladesh, their problems, the violations against them, the factors and impact of violations, state responsibilities, legal and constitutional protection, protection under international law etc.

**Keywords:** group, persecution, religious minority, violation, vanishing minority.

## 1. Introduction

The emergence of Bangladesh in 1971 was obviously the victory of the secular forces and the minority communities took it as an end to the reign of terror and communal tension they faced till the last days of Pakistan. But unfortunately they could not remain free of that nightmare for long. In the post- liberation period also the persuasion of anti-secular beliefs by the political leaders and political elites, incorporation of the highly discriminatory provisions throughout the constitutional amendments, state-sponsored terrorism, unhealthy state policy, enactment and continuation of laws and orders discriminatory for the minorities, abduction, torture, land grabbing, desecration of religious institutions

and places, forcible eviction, violation against minority women, electoral violence etc. caused a serious threat to the existence of minority people in Bangladesh and of their rights. And that led them to a huge migration to India and other places. Though Bangladesh has ratified all major international human rights treaties and conventions and is legally bound to comply with these international human rights treaties, but it does not comply with them so far as the minorities are concerned. Bangladesh is predominantly a Muslim country and the population data shows that 89.52% of the country's population is Muslim, and the remaining 10.48% consist of religious and ethnic minorities.

## 2. Religion and Politics: Bangladesh Perspective

Bangladesh rests on a set of primordial socio-cultural, linguistic and religious identities that have been distinctively shaped by the history of the Bengal delta. The socio-economic system around which modern civilization has grown up in Bengal is derived from a distinctive cultural-religious ideology. As a result, relatively flexible religious ideologies were mobilized around the mode of production and economic life of the people. Subsequent attempts to construct a unique linguistic or religious identity within Bangladesh have tended to ignore the multiple identities around issues of language, class and profession, and this has occasionally served to provoke confrontation and violence.

**Table 1: Hindu Population across Bangladesh (Administration)**

District	Percentage (%)
Dhaka	10.5
Chittagong	12.65
Rajshahi	12.09
Khulna	16.45
Barisal	11.70
Sylhet	17.80

## 3. The Concept of Minority

The term "minority" cannot be for practical purpose explained simply by interpreting the word in its literal sense. Generally, the minority is thought of as the opposite of the majority. In democratic societies, it is based on the numerical ratio to the population as a whole in a particular place. But in international law the term "minority" is commonly used in

more restricted sense. It has come to refer to a particular kind of group, which differs from the dominant group within the state. From a scientific point of view, the term “minority” includes many elements, which are changeable both in content and in degree of intensity. This term is most frequently used to apply to communities with certain characteristics like ethnic, linguistic cultural or religious etc and always in an organized community. The members of such community feel that they constitute a national group, or sub-group which is different from the majority group. Indeed it is true that, despite the differences among various groups, all are held together by a sense of nationality which is larger, though thinner, in a national consciousness, than that of either of the separate groups. A minority necessarily presupposes stable characteristics, which differ sharply from those of the rest of the population.

### **Distinctive features of Minorities**

- (a) Having own physic, culture, dialect etc the members of a minority group are treated as in low esteem by dominant group. The group usually has distinguished characteristics.
- (b) There are existing group feelings of loyalty .They identify themselves different, as part of a group.
- (c) Traditionally it follows or grows by birth but not voluntary that means birth of a child from a group treats a group member.
- (d) Members of a minority group have strong bounds of brotherhood and generally believe in endogamy.
- (e) They have tendency to preserve their language, culture, solidarity etc. They usually want to practice it. It matters that lower tendency in group faces extinction and higher tendency in a group can be sustained in longer time.

### **4. Religious Minority**

Societal abuses and discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice were continued in the reporting period. Clashes between religious groups occasionally occurred. In all cases the minority status of the victims played a role, although it should be noted that religious minorities are often at the bottom of the social hierarchy and, therefore, have the least political recourse. Hindu, Christian, and Buddhist minorities experienced discrimination and sometimes violence from the Muslim majority. Harassment of Ahmadis also occurred. From January to December 2011, 183 people belonging to religious minorities become victim of injury, assault, grabbing, attack, rape etc. Police frequently were ineffective in

upholding law and order and sometimes were slow to assist religious minorities. This attitude promoted a greater atmosphere of impunity for acts of violence against minorities.

**Table 2: Violence against Religious minority, 2011**

Minority groups	Injured	Assaulted	Grabbing		Attack		Looted	Rape	Others
			Land	House	Property	Temple			
Religious minority	107	2	6	2	21	25	13	13	4

## 5. Violence against the Minorities in Bangladesh

The minority communities, in general, remain in a state of insecurity and fear. As pointed out earlier the structural reasons for this nurture sustain a climate of hegemony and intolerance towards the minorities. Minority women remain more vulnerable because an attack upon them is regarded as an attack upon the community. Hindu women suffer from discriminatory family laws of their own community. Violence within the family often goes unreported. Extortion has become a norm in the political and social fabric. The minorities are more vulnerable because of their vulnerability. Their refusal to meet unjust extortion demands exposes them to violence or threats. It is important to note that threats to leave the country are not made to the members of the majority community. This suggests that the process of creating otherness amongst minorities has seeped into the sinews of the state and society. Many members of the Hindu community were alienated from their land by the Vested Property Act. Even though the Act was repealed in 2000, its implementation is in limbo. Attacks against the Hindu community continued, although numbers dropped significantly from the previous year. Hindu places of worship have been ransacked, villages destroyed and scores of Hindu women are reported to have been raped and injured. According to the Bangladesh Buddhist-Hindu-Christian Unity Council (BHBCOP), during the period from March 2009 to May 2010 there were at least 150 incidents of repression including land seizures, arson, rape, and at least three killings. Though once it was very common, but not rare even these days. It happens now and then everywhere in different ways. Minority girls become the main targets. In most of the cases the perpetrators cause it applying force, fear and inducement. In many cases the violence starts when the minority people refuse to pay money as per the demand of the ruling cadres mostly belonging to the ruling party or dominant figures of the locality. In many

cases the refusal makes them angry and they go on the rampage assaulting individuals, injuring people and ransacking houses and other properties of the minorities. There are many examples where the miscreants armed with lethal weapons burst into the minority house at midnight, went on rampage at the house, tortured the family members first and then kidnapped the girls, holding the family at gunpoint. Many girls and female members have been gang raped before the parents and family members. In most of the cases the terrorists warns the local minorities for stern punishment if the incident is reported to police. To escape humiliation and save their females minorities are sending out all the young girls and women to relatives in India or in towns. Minorities are nowhere safe in the country, but administration never does enough to endow justice.

### **6. Consequences of such violence**

Violence directed against religious minority communities continues to result in the loss of lives and property, but the motives--religious animosity, criminal intent, or property disputes--are often unclear. Religious minorities are vulnerable due to their relatively limited influence with political elites. Like many citizens, they are often reluctant to seek recourse from a corrupt and ineffective criminal justice system. Police are often ineffective in upholding law and order and are sometimes slow to assist religious minorities. This promotes an atmosphere of impunity for acts of violence against them. Religion becomes a modus operandi to gain political interest then the true sense of democracy turns into a mere rhetoric or more or less goes back into the primordial concept of 'Papacy' or 'Papal Authority' as propounded by Plato's nationhood under the 'Philosopher King'.

### **7. Conclusion**

The non-recognition of minority rights and minority existence through the state projects Bangladesh as a Bengali Muslim-dominated state which shrinks the space for the minorities to exist as distinct communities with their own customary rights, beliefs, culture and ways of life. On the other hand, the existence of laws and provisions privileging the majority put the minorities in a vulnerable position especially in the context of growing communalism and deteriorating law and order situation. Minority rights can only be ensured through the annulment of discriminatory provisions from the national Constitution and other laws. Genuine participation of the

minority communities should be ensured in all state affairs. Representative democracy should be introduced and practiced in a true sense in and outside the government bodies. We must practice a culture of tolerance and respect for others. Bangladesh was built up with the sacrifice of unlimited blood of different minority communities too. The religious and different ethnic minorities have contributed and participated in their own way towards building up the country. Their contribution and sacrifices during the war of liberation also need to be recorded and acknowledged in our national history.

## **8. Recommendations**

1. Ensure fair and neutral justice to the Minorities from the Judiciary and Administrative Authority.
2. Completely Repeal the Vested (Enemy) Property Act and put into practice it immediately.
3. Implement the Peace Treaty between Bangladesh and the Chittagong Hill Tracts.
4. Renovate Secularism in the meaning of tolerance in the Bangladesh Constitution<sup>32</sup> and the laws of the lands.
5. Make available reparation to the minority sufferers including women and children of all aggression, including those of 2001 and recover them fairly and equitably.
6. Reconstruct all damaged temples and places of worship that were subject matter of violence and loathing, and bring to an end any prospect attacks on places of worships irrespective of trust and religion.
7. Prevent inequity against religious and ethnic minorities and indigenous people of Bangladesh in all levels of government and non-government jobs, including the armed military and law enforcement department.
8. Make sure just share of positions for the ethno-religious minorities in the military, overseas service, paramilitary, police and civil services.
9. Guarantee security of life and property of the minority communities in Bangladesh. And uphold basic human rights of all citizens enshrined in the Constitution of Peoples' Republic of Bangladesh and Universal Declaration of Human Rights.
10. Permit NGO and rights advocacy organizations to work freely in the courts. And Stop land grabbing and forced eviction of Minorities of Bangladesh.

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