

[A Bleak Future for Bangladesh Hindu's](#)

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SOCIAL CHANGE

A Bleak Future for Bangladesh Hindu's

In the last fifty years, more than ten million of the country's Hindu's have fled to India in the face of sustained persecution and periodic riots

With its poverty and frequent cyclones, Bangladesh is major news each year. But the unfolding fate of Hindus in the country rarely makes headlines. The numbers tell the story. In 1872, 53% of the people in what is now Bangladesh were Hindus. In 1900, it was 32.7%, and by 1947, 22%. Today it has dropped to 10%. Conceivably, by 2050 Bangladesh will have achieved the status of Pakistan: no significant Hindu population. Ishani Chowdhury, a New York university student, was commissioned by Hinduism Today to report on one of the most heartless persecutions and forced migrations of modern times. Be advised, this is a gut-wrenching story of a people systematically hounded out of their ancestral land because of their religion, a story largely ignored by the world.

My mother saw with her own eyes trainloads of Hindus crossing over to Bihar, the state in which she lived. They were part of the ten million that fled to India from Bangladesh during the 1971 revolt. Their arms were slashed so they would not be able to work, their eyes were gouged out, breasts of women were severed, on their chests the words "Pakistan Zindabad" ("Long Live Pakistan") were branded with a hot iron

rod. People went insane from all the horrors they had seen and experienced.

One day a Hindu refugee had managed to come to my mother's house in hopes of finding shelter. She had not eaten in days, was dirty, her simple cotton sari ripped, her hair disheveled, her shoeless feet bleeding from the long journey. There was a look of hopelessness and fear in her eyes, like something was haunting her or about to attack her. All she could say was, "Save me! Save me! They are going to come after me! Save me!"

Days later, when she regained her senses, Laxmi Rani told her tale. Her father and her husband were respected doctors in their community. One day her husband went to the local pond but never returned. They found his dead body floating in the water. A while later, when she was feeding her small child, local Muslims stormed into the house and snatched her child from her arms. She pleaded with them as she followed them outside. The child was taken to a bonfire and tossed in. It was not an isolated incident, she said. Across the country, Hindu men were being indiscriminately butchered and the women grabbed and taken away by force. Little children were made to eat beef and forcibly converted to Islam. Somehow, Laxmi Rani managed to escape and boarded a train headed for India. Our family sheltered her and later took her to the refugee camp at the local temple. My mother related many such heart-wrenching stories.

The first great outflow of Hindus from Bangladesh occurred at Independence in 1947 with the creation of West Pakistan and

East Pakistan (as Bangladesh was then known) on opposite sides of the Indian subcontinent. Among those fleeing were most of the Hindus in the British administrative services. Their posts were filled by West Pakistanis with little respect for the local Bengali people of East Pakistan, who did not speak the Urdu language used in the West. It was the beginning of a hostile relationship that would culminate in the 1971 revolt in which Bangladesh, with India's help, broke with West Pakistan and became an independent nation. West Pakistan sent troops to quell the rebellious territory, believing the unrest to be the result of "a few intellectuals." West Pakistan President Khan predicted, "A few thousand dead in Dhaka, and East Pakistan will be quiet soon."

For nine months the West Pakistan army tried to secure the area by the most brutal means. Possibly three million people, mostly Hindus, died; and ten million Hindus and many Muslims fled to India. Finally, in December, 1971, India, unable to ignore the flood of refugees across her borders, intervened and defeated the West Pakistan army in a matter of days. Bangladesh, shattered by war and with much of its educated class dead, became the world's 139th country.

Two incidents from 1971 will help to convey the war's terror. According to the Hindu-Buddhist-Christian Unity Council, an organization which monitors the condition of minorities in Bangladesh, on June 13, 1971, 400 Hindus were loaded into a train that they believed would take them to India. Instead, they were taken to Syedpur where all were murdered by Pakistan army personnel. In the second incident, the Pakistan army attacked the Dhaka University, raping girls and killing at least 500 students, as well as many faculty. Similar killings and

rapes took place across the country. Time magazine reported on August 2, 1971, "The Hindus, who account for three-fourths of the refugees and a majority of the dead, have borne the brunt of the Muslim military hatred."

While the 1971 war impacted all Bangladeshis, pogroms against Hindus have occurred time and again in the country's history. For example, 50,000 Hindus in and around Dhaka were killed in 1964 when a holy relic was stolen from a mosque in Kashmir--compare this to a few thousand deaths in East Timor or Bosnia. After the 1975 assassination of President Sheik Mujibar Rahman by military coup, the constitution was, in phases, amended to make Islam the state religion of Bangladesh. In celebration, Muslim radicals attacked Hindus. India noticed, once again, an exodus of refugees at her borders. Following the destruction of Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in 1992 by Hindu militants, dozens of Hindus were killed in riots across Bangladesh and approximately 3,000 temples were damaged or destroyed. Who can imagine 3,000 American churches destroyed within days? "There were riots in East Pakistan almost every year, and severe killings in 1944, 1947, 1950, 1954, 1958, 1960 and 1963," states SK Bhattacharyya in *Genocide in East Pakistan/Bangladesh*.

Added to the long list of mass attacks is the daily harassment of Hindus. The Dhaka newspaper Sangabad reported on September 24, 1989, the story of Mrs. Birajabala Debnath of Nidarabad. She became a widow after her husband was murdered because he refused to give up his land to his Muslim neighbor. Then she and her five children were abducted in the middle of the night and murdered.

At New York's Bangladeshi Hindu Mandir (www.hindumandir.nu), nearly everyone has a somber tale to tell. This simple building has provided a safe haven of peace and prayer to the Hindus who managed to escape the ravages of Bangladesh. The weekly temple program I visited draws hundreds and is enlivened with the sounds of kirtan, Gita classes and tabla lessons. However, a sudden silence befalls the crowd when the topic turns to their native land. "We are all refugees. We cannot be Hindus there. They kill us whenever they get the chance. And the police do not do anything. Remember Dhaka University's Jagannath Hall?"

Mr. Shankar Das goes on to detail Amnesty International's 1996 report (www.amnesty.org/ailib/aipub/1996/ASA/31300496.htm) which stated nearly 700 law enforcement personnel raided the University's only Hindu hall in 1996, firing teargas, stealing valuables and raping and beating students. The raid, which lasted three hours, saw many deaths and injuries. "What can you do when even the law is against you?" As he fights back his tears, these once joyous temple devotees hang their heads in hopelessness. "We are lucky we are here where we can pray in peace. That is not possible in Bangladesh. The historic Ramna Kali Bari Temple in Dhaka, hundreds of years old, was destroyed. President Sheik Rahman further leveled the area.

If you go there now, all you will see is a park".

Ratan Dasgupta told me, "Harassment of womenfolk is all too common in Bangladesh. We are persecuted. That is why we have come here. Living there is impossible. Nearly ten years ago my cousin's sister was abducted from our house by a group of 25 neighborhood boys. They came with sticks and started breaking everything in the house. We were too afraid to do anything. Then they demanded my cousin. My uncle was hit when he tried to stop them. They grabbed her and took her away. God only knows what happened to her. Since she was very pretty, they either forced her to marry some Muslim boy or sold her to a brothel."

"Violence is random and without cause," a man from Montreal told me. "A Hindu woman will be taunted in public, her sari tugged at, her hand grabbed, all this in her husband's presence. And what will the police do when a complaint is received? Either dismiss it or join in the action." "If there is a fight between two Muslims, somehow they will resolve it," he went on, "but to vent the anger, they will go to a Hindu home and just start throwing rocks at the window."

In the midst of this crowd sits a small elderly woman in a simple white sari, her tear-filled eyes beckoning me. In a trembling voice she says, "I am an old woman. I have seen many things in my lifetime. In my village, we cannot hold Durga puja [see page 24]. Every year they come and destroy the deity. The

temple was smeared with cow's blood and urinated upon. The pujari was beaten and his house set on fire. We were told to stop doing puja. Everywhere around us people were screaming and crying. I lost my husband there. Even though my son has managed to bring us here, I worry about home. No one is safe there."

Muslims who protest the situation around them do so at great peril. Taslima Nasrin, spurred by the horror of atrocities against Hindus from 1990-92, wrote a novel, Lajja ("Shame"). Her act brought her a fatwa (death sentence, the same as meted out to Salman Rushdie) by Islamic extremists and has forced her to go into hiding in Europe.

There have been legal assaults against

the Hindus as well, most especially the Vested Property Act, formerly called the "Enemy Property Act." It allows for the lands of a person who has fled the country to be seized and redistributed. The US State Department said in its 1997 Human Rights report, "Many Hindus lost landholdings because of anti-Hindu discrimination in the application of the law." Millions of acres have been so confiscated.

Resident Hindus who try to sell their homes will often get no more than 50 percent of the market price, according to the man from Montreal. "Sometimes a fake deed will be used to claim his land," he said. "And most of the time, the Hindus lose the case in court despite all the evidence."

"In front of your eyes, you will see madrasas (Islamic schools) being built," I was told, "while the remaining Hindu centers are closing down. There is no pujari (priest) to teach, and whoever is there is afraid for their life. The remnants of our past are being lost, our new generation will not know anything about our religion or history."

Five decades of harassment in Bangladesh is exacerbated by the world's capacity to ignore the situation. As massive and horrific as the happenings are, you never see this on CNN or in Newsweek. The three-page 1999 US State Department report on International Religious Freedom in Bangladesh does detail discrimination against Hindus, but in only one sentence: "Intercommunal violence reportedly has caused some

members of religious minorities to depart the country, primarily Hindus emigrating to India where many have relatives." In such casual terms is written off one of the greatest forced human migrations of the 20th century, involving more than ten million people. Other reports regard the expulsion of Bangladeshi Hindus as a "done deed," and don't even list them as refugees any more, but as "resettled."

State Department reports on religious freedom have been criticized for being concerned only with Christians, who are few in Bangladesh (hence its three-page report). India, on the other hand, got a ten-page report, with five pages devoted to alleged discrimination against Christians (resulting in three deaths); just three paragraphs deal with Muslim attacks against Hindus in Kashmir

(resulting in 139 deaths). The word Kashmir occurs nine times, Christian 90 times; and there is nothing on the millions of Bangladesh Hindus now living in India.

Bangladesh Prime Minister, Sheik Hasina, said in New York recently that Bangladesh Hindus "have one foot in India, and the other in Bangladesh" and asked, given this divided loyalty, what they should expect and how much the local Muslims will listen to her government. And she is considered "pro-Indian" in Bangladesh.

Despite the discounting of atrocities, Bangladeshi Hindus in America cannot easily forget. While the second generation of Bangladeshi Hindus in America may take for granted the simple act of performing anjali (flower offering),

parents are quick to remind them of the privilege of being able to worship in peace. "It's not just prayer. It's at every level. In Bangladesh, if you are not a Muslim, then you cannot get a job. They will not let you get admission to good colleges. Our children must know this. It's their homeland. What we have not been able to do, they must carry out," remarks Mrs. Dey.

As the evening program draws to a close in New York, Mrs. Sen's tear-choked words darken the once joyous atmosphere. "Everyone is against us. Other Hindus don't help us. We cannot do anything. If we speak out, our family members back home will be tortured if word spreads. But we have to take a chance, this cannot go on forever. How much longer do we have to hide?".

Contacts: Hindu, Boudhwa and Christian
Oikya Parisad: Dr. Nim Chandra
Bhoumick, Secretary, c/o Department of
Physics, University of Dhaka, Dhaka 1000,
Bangladesh