Unwelcome In Their Own Land
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Acts of Terror and Temple Destruction Plague Hindu Life In Rural Bangladesh

Bangladesh - that homeland of monster monsoons, bone-crushing hurricanes and a flooding sea of people. (If every person on the earth moved to the US, the population density would equal this tiny nation.) But the 11 million Hindus in this 90% Muslim state fear the capriciousness of religious intolerance far more than the fury of rain or storm. Since Bangladesh's secession from Pakistan in 1971, life for those Hindus who didn't flee to India has been survival-oriented. "We do not want you kafirs (heathens) in our country," threatens a Muslim anti-Hindu slogan. "We want your land. So either you leave our country leaving your land, die or become Muslim by accepting Islam."

Attacks Chronically Go Unprosecuted

On October 4, 1991, the Bangladesh embassy in Kathmandu, Nepal, officially refuted a formal allegation made by the World Hindu Federation (WHF) of attacks on Hindu temples and on members of Hindu populace in Bangladesh. The Bangladeshi embassy source described this allegation as "baseless and tendentious." The embassy declared: "Bangladesh is known and acclaimed for its communal harmony and amity. All religious communities in this country are living peacefully in a vibrant spirit of mutual accommodation, tolerance and cooperation. All religions are practiced freely in Bangladesh and there is no interference at all from any quarter in this regard. The Bangladesh government had also been providing financial and other required assistance to various religious communities for their welfare and upkeep of their places of worship. Hindus being the second largest religious community in Bangladesh have also been receiving their due

share of patronage and support from the government."

This blunt denial of WHF's allegations by the Bangladesh embassy and its self-portrait as a paradise of religious tolerance disturbs anyone familiar with the true conditions there. Many temples have been attacked - idols of Kali, Shiva and Vishnu crushed and premises ransacked. Devotees are killed and reports of Hindu girls being abducted and raped are routinely ignored. The Indian newspaper The Organizer reported in specific detail on 19 such temple attacks between 1988 and 1989. Documentation of the attacks including photographs of the destroyed temples and the names and addresses of the parties injured or sexually abused were forwarded to many embassies including India, Nepal and USA as well as human service agencies such as Amnesty International and The Red Cross. Still, due prosecution of the wrong-doers has not happened.

Private property is the most tempting target for bully-tactics or legalized "confiscation." Excruciating overpopulation aggravates the problem. The Enemy Property Ordinance didn't help. Created in 1965 during the Pakistan regime - and reintroduced on March 26, 1972, by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman - its basic objective was to confiscate the property of the Hindus without compensation. It was a rare phenomenon that the Hindus in their own land were treated as enemies and their properties slowly slipped from beneath them like monsoon mudslides.

On July 1, 1974, a new bill was passed in Bangladesh parliament called the "Vested Non-Resident Property Act." In actual practice, there was no difference between this and the former ordinance. The government of Bangladesh proved even more ruthless than the government of Pakistan in executing the Vested Non-Resident Property Act. A report prepared by BMWS reveals: "Altogether 15 acres of land were declared "'enemy property' by the Pakistani government between 1965 to 1971, but during 1971 to 1975 alone 2.5 million acres of land were acquired and re-distributed under Vested Non-Resident Property Act by the Bangladesh government." Land seized by the government mushroomed from 2.5 million acres in 1975 to 3.0 million in 1984 and 4.4 million acres in 1988.

Bangladesh Minority Welfare Society summarized the impact of Vested Non-Resident Property Act in this way: "Firstly, it caused 90 percent migration of Hindus from Bangladesh to India; secondly, it led 45 per cent of Hindus to shift to safer places; and thirdly, it helped to destroy 80% of Hindu temples." In another survey, BMWS added that as much as 55 percent of the total land acquired under

the Vested Non-Resident Property Act was distributed in political leaders.

Apart from the confiscation of Hindu property, most of the Hindu temples have been destroyed, March 27th is treated as a "black day" by Hindus. On that day in 1971 the Ramana Kali temple, the centre of devotion of the Hindus in Dhaka, was partially destroyed by the Pakistani army. In 1973, the Bangladesh army, led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, razed the temple's entire complex and all its 66 acres were confiscated under the "Sawardy Uddyan Act." It was converted into a park.

As a result of persistent oppression, the Hindu and Buddhist tribals of the Chittagong Hill tracts have been reduced from 98 percent to 30 percent. In Bangladesh as a whole, the Hindu population has been reduced from 45% in 1947 to less than 15 percent today.

Hamburg Human Rights Symposium

Human rights organizations have persistently expressed grave concern over oppression of Hindu and Buddhist tribals in the Chittagong hill tracts of south-eastern Bangladesh. In this regard, the third international conference on the hill tracts was organized in Hamburg, Germany, September 13-16. Participants wondered how Bangladesh - dependent on foreign aid and donations to meet 90 percent of its public expenditure - could divert generous funds for military purposes in the hill tracts. The symposium officially appealed to all Bangladesh's donor nations to immediately terminate "developmental and other programs that contribute to human rights violations in the Chittagong hill tracts."

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