

# Bangladeshi Hindus likely to face new horrors with upcoming elections

By **AT News** - May 17, 2018



*Richard Benkin raises the issue of atrocities on Hindus in Bangladesh on international forum,*

A ground report on Bangladeshi Hindus from ,

## **Dr Richard Benkin**

For over a decade, I have been fighting for Hindus in Bangladesh—searching for small victories as the opportunity arises, and trying to rouse an apathetic public. Progress has been slow but steady. The initial reaction I faced—even by groups that advertised themselves as “pro-Hindu” was that no one cared—or would care; certainly, although they expressed sympathy for Hindus in Bangladesh, none of these groups would actually do anything. That’s changed. A much wider range of people and organizations recognize that Bangladesh’s Hindus are being persecuted out of existence, and many of those same, previously negative groups are falling over each other trying to take credit for the change. Still, there is much to do, and we have an imminent threat on top of it.

When the new Pakistani government published its 1951 census, Hindus accounted for almost a third of East Pakistan’s population. When East Pakistan became Bangladesh in 1971, they were less than a fifth; 30 years later less than a tenth; and according to most reliable

estimates, around one in 15 today. You don't have to be Stephen Hawking to see that the next numbers will be even lower. Throughout that entire period, Hindus suffered continual human rights abuses including murder, rape, child abduction, forced conversion, religious desecration, and more; all allowed to proceed with impunity by successive Bangladeshi governments of all parties. And during all periods of national elections, Hindus have been targeted for attack. Now to be clear, except for some individual police and government officials, the Bangladeshi government does not engage in these atrocities. I am confident that the Prime Minister believes in the values espoused in the Bangladeshi constitution. That, however, provides little comfort to the millions of Hindu victims of these atrocities. The Bangladeshi government's crime is allowing these things to proceed without being prosecuted finished; some officials have been protected after engineering cover ups of anti-Hindu crimes. Protecting the miscreants—many of whom are associated with the ruling party, whichever one it is—is a longstanding effort by all Bangladeshi governments. (These actions by the Awami League and others through 2011 are documented in my book, *A Quiet Case of Ethnic Cleansing: the Murder of Bangladesh's Hindus*. The human rights group, Global Human Rights Defence, has produced a film about Bangladesh's "culture of impunity" that deliberately allows these anti-Hindu actions to proceed without sanction. But again, we've made progress.

For years, no Bangladeshi government would admit that Hindus were being persecuted and often would deny it vehemently. One former Bangladeshi Home Minister responded angrily to my accusations, insisting that the United States is even worse. He never did address the evidence I presented of anti-Hindu atrocities in Bangladesh; no doubt because he couldn't do so without admitting his government's culpability. Then on July \_\_, 2015, in a meeting with former Congressman Bob Dold and me, Bangladesh's ambassador to Washington, \_\_\_\_\_, finally admitted that Hindus faced persecution in Bangladesh. We met in a room outside the House Committee on Ways and Means, which controls US spending; and I've often wondered if that venue and what it implied loosened the ambassador's lips. Since then, he has tried to walk back that admission, claiming that he has seen "further information" that changed his opinion; however, those attempts to undo a long overdue admission ring hollow and carry no weight with anyone who has heard them. The Bangladeshi government's new excuses have varied from "we're a poor country" to "the majority [Muslim] community faces the same problems."

While limited resources are never an excuse for allowing ethnic cleansing, Congressman Dold offered to overcome the Bangladeshi government's problem by telling the ambassador that "we [the United States] want to help you solve your problem." The latest claim by Sheikh Hasina's government, that what Hindus face is no different than what Muslims face, is ridiculous. While in Bangladesh recently, I confronted the police and other officials about specific anti-Hindu actions, and they tried to dismiss my concerns with that very excuse. I debunked their false claims by focusing their attention on two specific and all too common crimes: land grabbing and religious desecration. Almost no Muslim lands have been snatched, nor would it be justified by Bangladesh's Vested Property Act as anti-Hindu land grabbing is; and already back in the 1990s, at least 70 percent of all Hindu land had been  n with official sanction, as demonstrated in a landmark study by Abul Bakar of Dhaka University.

I can confirm personally frequent and widespread instances of anti-Hindu religious desecration and have seen the violated deities and remnants of destroyed temples. Neither local nor national officials have taken action to prosecute and punish the criminals in these cases. So I asked those police officials to tell me the last time a mosque was desecrated, and they produced not a single instance.

On 3 March 2018, when along with Bangladesh Minority Watch founder and President Rabindra Ghosh, I was asked to investigate a crime scene where a Hindu home and prayer room had been destroyed in a raid on the house earlier that day, after which we confronted the police and secured armed protection for the victimized family. Regardless, the police officer in charge insisted that this was not a case of persecution but a simple crime. Just as we were about to leave, with the police officer confirmed in his excuse, I turned and said:

"I noticed something at the crime scene, and have been thinking and thinking and thinking about it and just can't figure it out. As with other police districts not just in Bangladesh but all over, in my country, too; you have crimes everyday, right?"

He agreed.

“Of course, but there’s just one thing I can’t figure out. I saw a [member of Bangladeshi intelligence at the crime scene. Now I know you don’t have intelligence come to every simple crime. Why was he there?”

 officers sat in embarrassed silence.

“Could it be that this is more than a ‘simple crime’?”

Not surprisingly, the officer in charge did not even try to fumble with an answer.

We were able to help get some Hindus get their land back that had been snatched, as well as armed guards for individuals and *mandirs* at risk; so things can improve. Right now, however, Hindus face the stark and frightening reality of national elections at the end of this year. They know they will be targeted. Bangladesh’s Awami League government knows they will be targeted. We know Hindus will be targeted, because they have been targeted in every major election; and we have seven months to prepare. Here are some things we can do:

- If you live in the United States, Japan, Germany, or elsewhere in Europe; Bangladesh needs your country to purchase its exports and fund its UN peacekeepers. A strong message from your government that this funding will stop or be curtailed seriously if Hindus are attacked, will have an impact on the Bangladeshi government.
- If you live in India, Bangladesh depends on you for a range of critical resources including water flow and border control. A strong message from your government that election time violence against Hindus will not be tolerated will move the Bangladeshis to make sure the attacks do not occur. This is especially incumbent on India as the largest Hindu country in the world.
- If you live in any of the Gulf States, Bangladesh depends on receipts from their people working in your country. Here, too, the threat of freezing or cutting off this income stream will have an impact.
- The international Hindu community must help the Bangladeshi Hindus engage in lawful self-defense, and put the police and government on notice that any actions about which they are warned are on their heads if they do nothing to stop them.
- Have the UN station foreign peacekeepers in Bangladesh to protect minorities.

All of these efforts should be aimed at enabling the Bangladeshi government recognize their duty to their minority citizens, and to act on it. Moreover, whichever action you take in that regard, never let up on the pressure. We are talking about saving lives. If we fail to do these things, people will die.

It will work best at the organizational level, and if you are part of an organization that can be involved in carrying out this program or influencing those who can, you have a choice. Either do it and know that you have done a great service to humanity, or explain why you failed to act and many people died as a result.

*[Dr. Richard Benkin is an American human rights activist who has been fighting for justice for the Hindus of Bangladesh. More recently, he is also working to secure justice for the primarily Muslim nations of the Baloch, Pashtun, and Sindhi.]*

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