

**Time is Running Out for Bangladesh's Hindus—and for us.**

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**Address to Bharatiya Vichar Manch  
(Indo-American Intellectual Forum)**

**Cerritos, CA**

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Namaste.

I would like everyone here to engage in a little exercise and do so very personally.

Do it thinking about yourself and your own personal sense of morality.

If you suddenly found yourself in Germany in the early 1930s, knew what was going to happen in a few short years, and had a chance to prevent it, would you?

Even if doing so was inconvenient or involved personal sacrifice? Would you?

Maybe you did not know for certain that you could stop it, but you knew for certain what was going to happen if you did not. Would you still try, or would you go back to your pleasant life and pretend you did not know what you did?

Let's bring it a little closer to home. If you awoke tomorrow morning and instead of it being July 15, 2013, it was September 10, 2001 or November 25, 2008; you knew what was about to happen and had a chance to prevent it; would you?

In all three instances, would you not do everything in your power to avert these terrible losses of life?

If you answered yes, then history is giving you a second chance. For in many ways, today is September 10, 2001. Time is running out for the Hindus of Bangladesh, and so far, most people seem content to let it run.

The Holocaust, 9/11, and 26/11 have become shorthand for evil, for tragedy, for massive loss of life; and they deserve to be. Consider, though: 160 people were killed in the 2008 Mumbai terror attacks; just under 3,000 on 9/11; and an estimated 10-11 million in the Holocaust. According to Professor Sachi Dastidar of the State University of New York, *over 49 million Hindus are missing in Bangladesh*. Are their lives or those of the 12-15 million Hindus still living there worth any less than those that were lost in these other tragedies? No? Well, we seem to act as if they are. And that makes my blood boil. More importantly, it should boil the blood of everyone in this room *and move you to act*.

### **The Inescapable Facts**

The number of Hindus remaining in Bangladesh is about double the population of my home state, Illinois; about the same as all six New England states combined. Are we, as human beings, that much more valuable than the Hindus I met in Bangladesh? The number of Bangladeshi Hindus is twice that of all Israelis and Palestinians put together. Compare the number of *LA Times* articles and editorials about them with the number that concern Bangladeshi Hindus—which I am pretty sure is zero.

Let us review the facts and go where they take us.

Fact #1: Bangladesh's Hindu population is dying. After the population transfers that accompanied India's partition in 1947, they made up a little less than a third of East Pakistan's population. When East Pakistan became Bangladesh in 1971, Hindus were less than a fifth; thirty years later, less than one in ten; and several estimates put the Hindu population at less than eight percent today. If you still are having trouble wondering where this is going, take a look at Pakistan where Hindus are down to one percent or Kashmir where they are almost gone. Take a look at the future of Bangladesh's Hindus if we do not act.

Fact #2: Throughout that period, we have received litany after litany of verified anti-Hindu atrocities that successive Bangladeshi governments have not prosecuted. The few high profile cases that they were forced to prosecute involved an initial flurry of activity followed by the criminals being let out the back door of their "justice" system.

Fact #3: Those who claimed that the Awami League government of Sheikh Hasina would bring change and end Bangladesh's anti-minority and specifically anti-Hindu actions and policies were wrong. Not only are the ongoing atrocities evidence of that, compounding matters, the Awami League has passed on easy opportunities to repeal anti-Hindu laws; is getting ready to pass a new one; and its officials have made it clear that their government has no intention of admitting it has a problem or of fixing it.

Fact #4: Major media, world governments, and major organizations claiming to be the champions of human rights, should be outraged, should be defending these victims of ethnic cleansing, but have been silent.

Which leads us to...

Fact #5: If we have even an ounce of decency, WE must act to end these atrocities—and continue acting until they stop. Remember what the Dalai Lama once said: *“It is not enough to be compassionate; you must ACT.”*

***First, let’s get something out of the way.*** You cannot divorce what is happening to Hindus in Bangladesh from radical Islam; and you cannot blame all that is happening on “a few radicals,” which is what Bangladeshi and other apologists try to do. “A few radicals” by themselves could not be responsible for all of this and more, and the apologists know that.

That being said, it would be equally wrong to condemn the majority of Muslims or Islam per se. Muslims have been with me in the West Bengal villages and refugee colonies where many Hindu refugees have settled. I have met young Muslims in Dhaka who have been beaten by the Bangladeshi police and Islamists for trying to stop the ethnic cleansing of Hindus. In one tiny Hindu village in Bangladesh’s far north, that an angry Muslim mob recently savaged, the only thing that was preventing further attacks was the effort of four Muslim policemen who guarded the village of their own volition. And the first human rights victim for whom I put

myself in danger was an anti-radical Muslim, thrown in prison and tortured for his stance.

I just do not have time—strike that—the *Bangladeshi Hindus* do not have time for me to say all this every time I point out that Muslims commit these atrocities, Muslim officials abet and enable them, and that it is related to a larger movement within Islam that Muslims are not stopping.

Let's be less concerned with who might be offended than we are about the lives of millions of innocent people.

### **Legal Discrimination**

On April 30, 2009, Sheikh Hasina told a visiting French military commander that her government would repeal Bangladesh's "anti-minority laws." There are two significant things about that. First, she was probably the first sitting Prime Minister in history to admit that her country has anti-minority laws. Second, she did not keep her promise.

Worse still, the Awami League had two opportunities to repeal anti-Hindu laws with no repercussions, and it passed on both of them. Toward the end of the military's rule, Bangladesh's Supreme Court issued a *Rule Nisi*, directing the government to explain why the Vested Property Act—that law which empowers the Bangladeshi government to seize minority land and distribute it to its cronies—should not be declared null and void. One of the ruling generals told me

that it was not going to respond because it exceeded its mandate; and that there would be a new, elected government soon that could respond. It left that new government with the ability to neutralize that terribly racist law with the Court taking the political fall; but it refused to take advantage of it. In 2011, the Supreme Court declared several constitutional amendments problematic and directed the Bangladeshi Parliament—which was overwhelmingly controlled by the Awami League—to propose new ones. And it did—for every one except the Eighth Amendment that made Islam Bangladesh’s official religion and provided benefits and funding for Islamic institutions, not those of other faiths.

### **The Evidence**

All of that is the law; bad enough; but what about the people. Let’s look at the evidence.

In January 2009, shortly after the Awami League came to power in Bangladesh, I was asked to advise a consortium of Hindu groups there on what to do next.

“Well,” I said, “the last thing you should do is to go back to sleep.” I urged them to act precipitously and push the Awami League to live up to its posturing as a “pro-minority” party, which is what won it the vast majority of Hindu votes. If you don’t, I said, “we will see that their words are nothing more than words.”

Unfortunately, most of the Hindu leaders wanted to place their trust in the new government rather than in themselves. Bad decision. Worse, their wait and see attitude proved deadly.

- As documented in my book, *A Quiet Case of Ethnic Cleansing: the Murder of Bangladesh's Hindus*, during the Awami League's first year in office, major anti-Hindu incidents occurred at the rate of almost one per week. They included murder, rape, child abduction, forced conversion, physical attacks, land grabs, religious desecration; and at least one three-day pogrom that occurred right behind a Dhaka police station.
- Things were no better the second year. The number and intensity of anti-Hindu atrocities did not drop, and in my book, I document one 26 day period in 2010, when there were seven major anti-Hindu actions or almost one every three days. The Hindu American Foundation, Bangladesh Minority Watch, and others document a similar level of atrocities in the third year, 2011.
- As we moved into 2012, I confirmed at least 15 similar incidents in the first quarter alone—almost 1.25 every single week—and as we were moving out, almost one major incident a week during the fourth quarter. In at least two cases, Bangladeshi officials warned human rights activists to stop investigating the matter or face serious consequences.
- In between, there was a nine day period in May that saw an abduction, a murder in broad daylight, and two gang rapes, one of a child on her way to a Hindu festival: four horrific incidents within a nine day period and no police actions against the known perpetrators.

- Do any of these names sound familiar: Samrity Rani, Sanju Rani Dev, or Julie Sinha? Probably not; certainly not if you were looking in major media. Samrity Rani was a young wife and mother from Vingravo village in Dhaka state, murdered in broad daylight. Twenty-eight year old Sanju Rani Dev was gang raped. And Julie Sinha, 23, was abducted on her way to class at Sha Jalal University in Sylhet.

All of these incidents were reported in local media, investigated and confirmed by human rights activist Rabindra Ghosh, and by my own associates as well. With my limited resources, I verified some of them first-hand and others with at least two independent witnesses. But they were not reported in *The LA Times*, *New York Times*, *Times of London*, *Times of India* or any other major paper. You did not hear about them on BBC, CNN, any network news, the left wing media, the right wing media, or any other major media. We have to wonder how much these media giants could have done—if they cared enough to do so.

### **Not getting better**

Unfortunately, despite the empty utterances of the Bangladeshis themselves and international elites, including our own State Department and the current Indian government; things are *not* improving for Hindus under the Awami League. In May 2012, I met Bangladesh's US ambassador in Washington with the intention of having an honest dialogue about how we can move forward. He categorically denied that Hindus face any difficulties in Bangladesh. No matter what facts I produced, he continued to insist that Hindus in Bangladesh were just fine, thank you very much, and that his government did not have to do anything further. I

reminded him that demographers have said that the decline of his country's Hindu population is so severe that it cannot be attributed to birth and death rates plus voluntary emigration. "Oh yes it can," he said. The reason for the decline—make sure you are sitting down for this—is that Bangladeshi Hindus "cannot find suitable matches for their children, so they go to India where there are more Hindus."

"You're kidding, right?" I asked. But he insisted he was not. And this was around the time of that horrific nine-day period noted above.

With no repercussions for their ethnic cleansing of Hindus, Bangladeshis do not even find it necessary to be credible in their denials.

This past February, I had the same sort of confrontation with Bangladesh's Home Minister in Dhaka. After his categorical denials, he chastised the United States for "the enclaves of the Red Indians" and the Sandy Hook murders in Connecticut. As I pointed out to him, their relation to his government's refusal to prosecute those who commit atrocities against Hindus is strained at best and ridiculous on their face; that his great revelation seemed to be that people die in the US, as well as Bangladesh. After we argued for a good while longer, he did say that if anything was happening, he would personally address it. He just needed me to send him the evidence, which I did but first said that "it is rather odd that you, Bangladesh's Home Minister sitting in Dhaka would be dependent on some man from Chicago for evidence of human rights abuses in your own country. If that is the case, it suggests even more serious problems."

Before moving on, I want to tell you about Eti Biswas, a 23 year old Hindu woman from Bangladesh's Bagerhat district. The same day that the Minister denied any problems for Hindus in Bangladesh, her family met me in Dhaka and said that local officials and other local thugs abducted her on December 21, 2012, after the family refused the attempted seizure of their land. Police and other officials refuse to even question, let alone arrest known perpetrators; and the family's pleas for the police to help them at least recover the young woman have fallen on deaf ears. They asked me to help, and I brought the matter to the Home Minister with the evidence he demanded. He never even responded, and Eti Biswas remains missing to this day.

**What we can and should do about it: First Action**

Our biggest problem is that so few people know about the ethnic cleansing of Bangladesh's Hindus. I am convinced that most people, if they knew, would be outraged and would want to do what they could to help. Shedding more light on this issue is one of our primary tasks.

There are two immediate actions you can take that will advance this cause. Here is the first one. Last week, I met with the Mayor of my town, Mount Prospect, Illinois, in suburban Chicago, and asked the town to issue a proclamation about the Bangladeshi Hindus. Mount Prospect, working with me, had issued successive proclamations honoring Holocaust victims during the "Days of Remembrance," which is the time of year when we officially do that. It seemed to me that the

Bangladeshi Hindus deserve no less. So, I approached Mayor Arlene Juracek with a sample proclamation I wrote that recognized them during the several days of Durga Puja, October 9-13 this year. You see, there should be some rationale for when you are doing this, and this also gave her enough time to consider the matter.

I believe we will have the proclamation, and I have no doubt that the final form will be different from my initial mock up. Now, it is time for you to do the same. Cerritos, California, is known for its large Hindu population, which means that you should have the ability to approach your locality and get something done. Ask for about a half hour of the Mayor's time (or in Cerritos, it might be a City Council member; you should know the person to contact), and tell the person about what is happening to Hindus in Bangladesh. Emphasize the important Hindu celebration of Durga Puja and the fact that many Bangladeshi Hindus will not celebrate it out of fear. Present the sample proclamation and make sure to say that you are happy to work with the official in wording and such so that it is acceptable as a proclamation. Then, follow up. Make sure your town knows how important this is to you and other citizens of Cerritos.

Those of you who live in other towns can do the same. Who will coordinate this effort for Cerritos? Vinot Amb.....; good. Here is the sample. Please work with me. If we get one or two towns then a few more, we can expect this to turn into something that more and more towns will adopt perhaps every year around Durga Puja. Once those first few do it, other towns will have the ability to do the same, and we will help educate people about this issue.

### **What we can and should do about it: Second Action**

Let's talk about something else you can do. I have been working with a group of people in Bangladesh—mostly Hindu, but Muslim, too—who have now held three public demonstrations about this.

- They get little press coverage—but a little more each time.
- They know that each demonstration is not going to change the world, but having them again and again and again might.
- They keep doing it regardless of each action's success.
- They did not wait for massive numbers of people before acting.

We live in a free country where constituent groups are encouraged to make their voices heard, unlike Bangladesh where my colleagues are beaten and arrested. If they can act, we can. In fact, we should be ashamed if we do not.

The Bangladeshis are not getting away with their attack on Hindus because they are so powerful or so smart; but we act as if they are. We accept words and empty promises, though we should know better. We pretend that bad regimes will somehow do good if we pretend they will; they do not. Weak and self-serving governments get away with human rights abuses because we allow it. Remember the phrase attributed to Edmund Burke: *"All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing."*

The Bangladeshis will never stop atrocities against Hindus because it is the right thing to do. We must force a change. Hit them where it hurts. Personal outrage does not hurt; threats do not hurt; action does.

The Bangladeshi economy is inordinately dependent on two things, the export of readymade garments and the provision of UN peacekeeping troops. Hit either sphere hard, and Bangladesh's resistance to moral behavior will collapse.

The garment industry employs millions of people, and the BGMEA—Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association—is Bangladesh's only effective lobbying group. Do you remember that Home Minister? He was haughty and defiant until I suggested that continuing his course of action might make it difficult for Bangladesh to sell its products on the international market—at which point he did what the Bangladeshis love to do when forced to own up to their sins. He played the “poor me” card, whimpering that what I suggest would be costly to his poor country. We are the second largest importer of Bangladeshi goods, and each time we buy their products, we support their ongoing human rights atrocities against Hindus. We need to use that leverage and stop funding ethnic cleansing.

Who funds UN peacekeeping missions? American taxpayers provide 27.14 percent of the peacekeeping budget plus uncounted additional support—multiple times greater than any other country. Would we continue to do so if we knew it supported gang rapes, pogroms, and ethnic cleansing? Bangladesh and Pakistan swap places as the countries providing the most and second most peacekeeping

troops every month: odd when you consider that neither can keep the peace within their own borders. Without those receipts, both countries are in trouble.

Many of you might recall Bangladesh's 2007 coup. I was there when it happened. There was violence in the streets as the major parties were locked in conflict over charges of election fraud. Western democracies were urging Bangladesh not to hold the elections until they can guarantee that they would be fair ones. The military gave the government an ultimatum to fix it in 24 hours or it would. Shortly thereafter, the government resigned, the military took over, and the elections were cancelled. Why did it act? Sources within the military told me at the time that they acted because they thought the UN would join the Western democracies and then pull their peacekeeping troops. Besides losing the money, they had to face the prospect of having thousands of angry, unemployed, and armed young men flooding their already volatile country. Can you blame them?

With this information, we need to think and act strategically.

Working with our elected officials I learned that they will do the right thing, but they need the voters to tell them about it. Legislators have such a wide range of issues to consider that they need our help to identify those things that are most important. I think we all would agree that saving 12-15 million lives should be a priority.

There are more Hindus in California than in any other state, an estimated 600,000 according to the Santa Barbara based Institute of American Religion; and a lot of

them live here in the 39<sup>th</sup> Congressional District. Your Senators and House Members will listen to you but only if you yell loud enough for them to hear.

Senators Dianne Feinstein and Barbara Boxer are known for their strong stance opposing violence against women. Both would be outraged about that Hindu girl raped on her way to a religious festival or the 14-year-old gang rape victim who talked to me shortly after she and her family escaped to India; but they cannot be outraged unless they know about it.

Here is another important piece of information. Senator Boxer is the number two Democrat on the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations and chairs its Subcommittee on International Operations and Organizations, Human Rights, Democracy and Global Women's Issues: Human Rights and Women's Issues. Do you think she might be able to do something *if we press our case and our political might?*

Let's take your Congressman, Ed Royce. He has an established history of supporting the Hindu community, and I have regular contact with his staff in Washington. Good start. Congressman Royce also chairs the House Committee on Foreign Affairs. I have no doubt he will help us—I know his staff support us—but he has to know it is important to us.

To get this done, no one has to go to remote Bangladeshi villages with me or even be part of a delegation to Washington. Senator Boxer has an office in Los Angeles, and Congressman Royce has offices in Brea and Rowland Heights; all between 17

and 23 miles from here. Imagine the reaction if 50 people showed up there and—forcefully but respectfully—asked to speak with the Chief of Staff or whoever was in charge. Although you want to see the most senior person there, do not worry if this first foray gets you an audience with a lower level staffer. There will be others opportunities and you will have gotten your message across. Congressman Royce has demonstrated his ongoing support. Know, however, that he and every member of the US House of Representatives are up for election next year and every two years. If you live in another Congressional district, do not miss this chance to give your voice added weight with your Representative. One other thing you must always remember. Even though elections are important to all staff, you must *never* talk about elections, donations, or anything like that with Congressional or Senatorial staff. It is illegal.

### **The Action**

We must implement a three-pronged action to inform them just how important this is and how important it is to each of us personally: successive visits to their offices; faxes; and phone calls.

First, who will be responsible for organizing it and making sure it happens? I have a space here on my paper to write that name Vinot, Good. Next, who here will participate? Vinot, can someone circulating a sign-up sheet? How many can get at least one friend, colleague, or family member to go with you to these offices? Good, we have taken the first step: committing ourselves to act.

When we act here is what we need to do:

- One, be strong and passionate, not deferential, but respectful.
- Two, grab their attention within the first minute or you will lose them.
- Three, be clear and concise, taking no more than a few minutes to make your point. You can give more exposition after that.
- Four, be clear what you want the Senator or Representative to do. If not, no matter how compelling your case, they will be left wondering why you bothered to talk to them about it.
- Fifth, begin with the assumption that you are dealing individuals who want to do what is right. These are good people, and we should treat them as such.

Choose a first date for the visit, and then choose follow up dates based on what happens. The first visit might involve anywhere from a dozen to 50 people. The larger number is to emphasize the importance. Some might not meet with the staff, but their very presence will make an impact. Think about it from their perspective. If 50 people are willing to leave their homes, brave traffic on the 605, just to make a point; it probably means there are a lot more people back home who care about this. Before choosing a day and time, call the District office and find out when senior staff are there; what would be the best time to see them. If the person asks why, be general. ***Always remember, these people work for you!***

On the appointed day, you all show up and present your case. I can help with the information, but only as suggestions. You have to make it yours and be prepared to respond intelligently to questions.

Here is a brief opening for Senator Boxer: “Hindus are being ethnically cleansed in Bangladesh and our families face regular atrocities. The Hindu population has dropped from about a fifth to under eight percent since Bangladesh won its independence. Its governments, including the present one, refuse to prosecute the crimes or punish the perpetrators. We need your help or women and girls will continue being raped, villages will continue to face pogroms, and the US will continue funding it. Without strong action, Bangladesh’s Hindus will be nothing more than a memory perhaps in our lifetime.” That is your attention getting start.

As the discussion progresses, make sure you can make the following points:

- One, these atrocities have been verified by at least two independent sources and in many cases first-hand by my associates or me;
- Two, they occurred under the current government;
- Three, that government has not only failed to prosecute these crimes, but in many cases participated in them;
- Four, multiple government officials have made it clear that they intend to take no further action to protect their Hindu citizens;
- Five, Muslims, as well as Hindus, have tried to stop this only to be attacked by Islamists and the government for doing so;

- Six, Bangladesh actually has laws that are anti-Hindu in their design and implementation. One of them, the Vested Property Act, continues in full force despite government denials and provides the economic engine of ethnic cleansing.

What do you want Senator Boxer to do about it?

- Given her leadership role on the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations Committee and its Subcommittee on International Operations and Organizations, Human Rights, Democracy and Global Women's Issues; have Committee hearings on these government tolerated acts of violence against women and about anti-Hindu ethnic cleansing;
- Introduce a bill tying tariffs and trade with Bangladesh to their stopping these human rights atrocities;
- Send a formal letter of concern to the Bangladeshis about this. The ranking Republican on the Committee, Senator Bob Corker, should have information about this, too, making it a bi-partisan issue.

For Congressman Royce, you can use the same attention getting opening and other elements and note the following changes:

- Note his history of support for the Hindu community.
- Given his leadership role on the House Committee on Foreign Affairs; have Committee hearings on these government tolerated acts of anti-Hindu ethnic cleansing;

- As a member of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, he also can have them hold hearings and have me testify.
- Introduce a bill tying tariffs and trade with Bangladesh to their stopping these human rights atrocities;
- Send a formal letter of concern to the Bangladeshis about this. A number of committee members, including ranking Democrat Eliot Engel should support the issue, making it bi-partisan.
- You can also note that I have been working with his staff, Melissa Medina and Worku Gachou.

Feel free to mention my name, provide contact information, and give them a copy of my book. ***But in everything you do, be concise.*** Offer to work with staff and ask when the Senator or Representative is in town next so you can meet face to face.

Once you get a name, keep calling, and make further visits, each with a specific purpose in mind. Make weekly calls and send weekly faxes until we succeed. Emails mean little and snail mail takes forever to get to the right people. Telephone calls, faxes, and visits will get their attention. The calls should be concise, let them know how concerned you are about what is happening to Hindus in Bangladesh, and be specific about what you want them to do. Faxes can be a little longer but also concise. I have telephone and fax numbers for the Washington and District offices for Senator Boxer and Congressman Royce; which I will email later.

Be prepared for inaction on our side and lies from the Bangladeshis. Our obligation is to overcome both until the atrocities stop. Give up only when you are okay with the atrocities. Call on me for whatever help I can give.

Thank you. I will take questions.

**Senator Barbara Boxer**

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