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## **Ethnic Butchery and Genocidal Massacres: Perpetrators and Bystanders to the Islamist campaign to Get Rid of Bangladesh's Hindus**

GPN Original

**Richard Benkin**



*Bangladesh's Hindu population is dying. That is an irrefutable fact, supported by decades of data. A consistent torrent of reports documenting anti-Hindu incidents in Bangladesh has bombarded anyone who had an interest in what is happening in the world's seventh largest country. Those "incidents" included murder, gang rape, assault, forced conversion (to Islam), child abduction, land grabs, and religious desecration -- with government culpability.*

Bangladesh's Hindu population is dying. That is an irrefutable fact, supported by decades of data. At the time of India's partition in 1948, 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 of the new nation's people. Thirty years later, they were less than one in ten; and while current statistics do not yet exist, several estimates put the Hindu population at less than eight percent. Using demographic and other calculations, Professor Sachi Dastidar of the State University of New York estimates that about 40 million Hindus are missing from the Bangladeshi census.<sup>1</sup>

During the same period of time, a consistent torrent of reports documenting anti-Hindu incidents in Bangladesh has bombarded anyone who had an interest in what is happening in the world's seventh largest country. Those "incidents" included murder, gang rape, assault, forced conversion (to Islam), child abduction, land grabs, and religious desecration. And while Bangladeshi officials might assert—with only some justification—that the perpetrators were non-state actors, government culpability rests, at the very least, in the fact that it pursues very few of these cases and punishes even fewer perpetrators of these atrocities. Successive Bangladeshi governments appear to have been passive bystanders, failing to exercise their sovereign responsibility to protect the life and security of all their citizens; and thus they have sent radical Islamists and common citizens alike a clear message that these acts can be undertaken with impunity.<sup>2</sup>



Additionally, I have interviewed dozens of Bangladeshi Hindu refugees living in largely illicit colonies throughout North and Northeast India. In describing the attacks that forced them to leave their ancestral homes, they made it very clear that their attackers were not necessarily members of radical Islamist groups. Instead, most were neighbors or otherwise everyday Muslims. They also reported with near unanimity that when they went to the police and other local officials for help, they were advised to drop the subject and

“get out of Bangladesh.” Last February, I interviewed a family that just crossed in to India only 22 days before. They told me about an uncle being killed, the father being beaten, and their small farm invaded by a large number of Muslims. Local Muslims also raped their 14-year-old daughter. The perpetrators were simply Muslims who lived in the area and knew they could have their way with the family and seize their land.<sup>3</sup>

***Often the most “successful” cases of genocide and genocidal massacres accompanied by mass expulsions occur when a small cadre of true believers incite average citizens to engage in heinous acts against a targeted minority that they otherwise would not dream of committing.*** At a 1996 public rally, for instance, former and future Prime Minister Khaleda Zia fanned anti-Hindu flames by warning Bangladeshis that Hindus threatened to take over the country; saying that the traditional Hindu wail, “uludhhwani,” would soon replace the traditional Muslim call to prayer.<sup>4</sup> There might be no *Janjaweed* in Bangladesh, but its Hindu community is facing a slow motion and process of destruction at the hands of the Bangladeshi majority little known to the western world.

This is the fatal flaw in US and western policy in this region that provides an ideological basis for ignoring the ethnic massacres and expulsions of Bangladesh’s Hindus. The investment of outside actors, notably the United States, in the success of the current Awami League government in Dhaka rests on uncritically accepting its claim to be “pro-minority” and different from previous military-backed and BNP-led governments. Yet, fifteen months after taking office, the Awami League government has not been able to move Bangladesh away from its previous abuses. Anti-Hindu actions and the government’s complicity have continued unabated.

During the first two months of Awami rule, serious anti-Hindu occurred on the average off one and a half per week. They included religious desecration, land grabs, beatings, kidnapping, rape and murder. The crimes were religiously based; that is, the victims were targeted because they were Hindu; and *the government did not prosecute them.*<sup>5</sup> This passive role appears to signal that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her party

would not interfere with the Hindu community's destruction. The onslaught has continued throughout 2009, and last spring saw what can be described only as an anti-Hindu pogrom in the nation's capital. Its western supporters in government, NGOs, and the media were champions in making sure that these abuses were not publicized.<sup>6</sup> The Bangladesh Hindu, Buddhist, Christian Unity Council, for instance, reports a total of 13 similar incidents in March and April. Other NGOs, including Bangladesh Minority Watch and Global Human Rights Defence, as well as both vernacular and English-language newspapers, concur. Yet, media outside of Bangladesh did not pick up any of them.<sup>7</sup>

Let's take as an example that anti-Hindu pogrom in Dhaka. In March and twice in April, a community of approximately 400 Hindus was reportedly going about its business when "hundreds of Muslims" suddenly descended on them and demanded they quit the homes where they and their families had lived for the past 150 years. Witnesses also report that police watched passively while attackers beat residents and destroyed a Hindu temple. The Bangladeshi Government said no anti-Hindu pogrom occurred, and the cover up moved from local police to the Dhaka police chief to an Awami League MP. Several human rights groups, as well as my own network, conducted extensive investigations and confirmed the attacks. Many residents remain homeless; and the Bangladeshi Government has not even bothered to deny that Hindus were beaten, some religious desecration occurred, or that police were present during the attacks. We also confirmed that the area attacked was located directly behind a police station and the Temple only about 18 m from it; yet, the police did nothing to stop its destruction. Police also justified the land grab under Bangladesh's Vested Property Act, which has fueled the seizure of Hindu lands for over 35 years. Yet, except for some local Bangladeshi papers, *The Daily Pioneer* of India, and some blogs; the media ignored it.<sup>8</sup>

This is not about one terrible event, but about a system of legalized ethnic cleansing that has proceeded non-stop for decades and which places every one of Bangladesh's 13,000,000-15,000,000 Hindus at risk. For despite Government protestations to the contrary, normal legal protections are suspended for Hindus and other minorities in Bangladesh who are often subject to arbitrary actions by the Muslim majority. Moreover, the nominal law enforcers have become enforcers of lawlessness, abetting crimes against minorities and sending a message that Bangladesh is a country where the law gives Muslims preferential treatment even if it means ignoring elementary standards of justice. (The Eighth Amendment to Bangladesh's constitution declared Islam the official state religion and gave rise to numerous preferential policies and actions that has made Hindus and other minorities second class citizens.<sup>9</sup>)

One would expect that the onus would fall on Bangladesh to convince the rest of the world that it is not guilty of ethnic cleansing and tolerating bigotry. Yet, the opposite seems to be the case. For no major human rights body has acknowledged the seriousness or even the existence of this quiet case of ethnic cleansing (as I have termed it because of the world's silence). Whether it is Amnesty International or the United Nations Human Rights Commission, they have devoted far more energy and resources to criticizing the US detention center at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, than they have to the plight of Hindus—whether in Bangladesh; Pakistan, where they have been

reduced from almost a fifth in 1965 to one percent today; Malaysia, which is engaging in a particular vicious attack on Hindus and Hinduism; or even the smaller nations of Trinidad and Tobago, Fiji, or Bhutan. The latter has been expelling Hindus to refugee camps in neighboring Nepal since the 1980s.<sup>10</sup> It is no wonder that several have suggested an anti-Hindu bias on the part of these rights groups.

There is no internal dynamic in successive Bangladeshi governments to put an end to the atrocities or even the Nuremburg-like laws of discrimination. University's Professor Abul Barkat has demonstrated both major parties have benefited materially from them and used the spoils to strengthen their patronage base.<sup>11</sup> The only way things will change is when some outside force makes it clear that the negative consequences from continued ethnic cleansing are more painful than the political cowardice that keeps it going. So far, no one—not India, the United States, the United Nations, or anyone else—has stepped up to take a principled stand.

## **Conclusion**

Genocidal scenarios result from human choice and bystander indifference. What we have in Bangladesh are genocidal massacres and expulsions resulting from incitement and actions of non-governmental perpetrators and inaction by governmental bystanders, and the indifference of the outside world. This essay states the case for setting in motion actions to hold the Bangladesh Government accountable for its Responsibility to Prevent and Protect, in accordance with international humanitarian law.

***Richard Benkin PhD** is a human rights activist, author, and speaker. Over the past five years, he has among other things freed a journalist from imprisonment and torture in Bangladesh, forced Bangladesh's notorious RAD to release an abductee unharmed, halted an anti-Israel conference in Australia, and raised the issue of Bangladesh's ethnic massacres and expulsions of Hindus in Washington and other capitals. His many publications on abuse of human rights in Bangladesh are listed on the website of Scholars for Peace in the Middle East. He recently returned from a trip to India where he won verbal support from several political and Lok Sabha officials, addressed universities and large public gatherings, and established a communication conduit with the highest echelons of the Bangladeshi government. Dr. Benkin has also received verbal support for US Congressional hearings about the Bangladeshi Hindus. In 2005, Benkin received a meritorious award from the US Congress for his work.*

*According to Benkin, after a trip to Bangladesh which capped his successful effort to free a political prisoner, a group of Bangladeshi Hindus contacted him and asked for his help. Although he knew something about their persecution, Benkin immersed himself in research about the subject and vowed to stop it. Since then, he has met with victims and victimizers, gathering information and getting it to US leaders, and working for action.*

*Benkin is President and a founder of Forcefield, a human rights NGO, described as "non-agenda driven," in contrast with other human rights organizations. Its first human rights case is that of Bangladesh's Hindus.*

## Reference Notes

<sup>1</sup> Population statistics taken from the census of Pakistan (1948), and Bangladesh (1974 and 2001). Also see Dastidar, Sachi G.; *Empire's Last Casualty: Indian Subcontinent's Vanishing Hindu and other Minorities*. (Kolkata: Firma KLM Private Limited, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> See for example, incidents in the monthly newsletter of the Bangladesh Hindu, Buddhist, Christian Unity Council available at <http://www.bhbcuc-usa.org/index.html>. The Hindu American Foundation has documented these atrocities in successive annual reports, entitled *Hindus in South Asia and the Diaspora: A Survey of Human Rights [followed by a specific year]*; copyright Hindu American Foundation. For instance, 2007, pages 5-21; 2008, pages 3-15. They also are available at the Hindu American Foundation web site, <http://www.hafsite.org>. Global Human Rights Defence investigates and reports on human rights violations against Bangladeshi Hindus at <http://ghrd.org>. Click "countries" and then "Bangladesh." The first and third organizations have also worked with me in providing evidence of anti-Hindu activities in Bangladesh.

<sup>3</sup> This information came from recorded and unrecorded interviews I had with Bangladeshi Hindu refugees, living in mostly illegal colonies in the Indian states of West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, and Uttarakhan, from 2008-2010. The 14-year old rape victim related the story to me in an encampment in North Dinajpur near the Bangladesh border in March 2009.

<sup>4</sup> "Bangladesh opposition leader accused of hurting religious sentiment," *Agence-France Press, November 18, 1996*. Also see the following examples. Anwar Ali And Rafique Sarker, "Villagers see Rangpur arson as persecution," *The Daily Star of Dhaka*, August 28, 2004; in which victims and victimizers cited police inaction with regard to anti-Hindu violence as incitement for individuals to engage in these criminal acts without fear or legal repercussions. Also see "Death threat to Indians," *Cape Argus*, December 6, 2004, in which Hindu "crimes" in the Gujarat communal violence was cited as a reason to kill visiting Indian sportsmen.

<sup>5</sup> See Appendix. The veracity of all incidents has been confirmed by multiple direct sources, noted in the appendix.

<sup>6</sup> Richard L. Benkin, "A Terrifying Existence," *The Daily Pioneer [India]*, July 21, 2009. Also, "Call to stop eviction of Dalit people," *The New Age of Dhaka*, April 10, 2009. "Eviction of Dalits protested," *The Daily Star of Dhaka*, April 10, 2009.

<sup>7</sup> Sitangshu Guha, editor. *Unity: A Monthly Newslettr of Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council*. Vol.2 Issue 2, published March 31, 2009; Vol. 2 Issue 4, published April 30, 2009; Vol. 2 Issue 5, published May 31, 2009. "Lady lawyer assaulted," *The Independent (of Dhaka)*, March 24, 2009. "Two Hindu houses looted," *The Independent*, March 24, 2009. Also see the following vernacular papers for articles throughout March and April 2009: *Daily Prothom Alo*, *Daily Samakal*, *Daily Ittefa*, *Daily Jajjaidin*, and others.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> "Bangladesh Parliament Votes to make Islam State Religion," *New York Times*, June 8, 1988. Shakhawat Liton, "After Fifth Amendment, Constitution lost basic character," *The Daily Star of Dhaka*, February 3, 2010. In October 2005, I spoke at a meeting of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, which focused on Bangladesh. In the course of the meeting, Hindus testified that this provision of the constitution makes them and their families second class citizens in many different ways, including government priorities. The Bangladeshi government has the text of the constitution as modified at <http://www.pmo.gov.bd/constitution/contents.htm>.

<sup>10</sup> On multiple occasions, I combed Amnesty International's web site and found precious little, if anything, about terrorism and anti-Hindu actions by radical Islamists. On one occasion, for instance, I found six items under the war on terror heading; five were about Guantanamo. Additionally, Amnesty International's 2009 report on Bangladesh does not even mention oppression of Hindus. Also see previously cited reports by the *Hindu American Foundation*.

<sup>11</sup> Abul Barkat, Azizur Rahman, Shafique uz Zaman, Avijit Poddar: Impact of vested property act on rural Bangladesh: an exploratory study. Prepared for Association for Land Reform and Development, Bangladesh. Dhaka: University Research Corporation. 1996. Abul Barkat (ed.): An inquiry into causes and consequences of deprivation of Hindu minorities in Bangladesh through the Vested Property Act: framework for a realistic solution. Dhaka: PRIP Trust. 2000. The text of the Vested Property Act is available at <http://www.drishtipat.org/HRLaw/vestedprop.htm>.