

Bangladesh Hearing - Testimony of Sachi Dastidar

United
States Commission on International Religious Freedom

Hearing on

Bangladesh: Religious Freedom, Extremism, Security, and
the Upcoming National Elections

Thursday, December 4, 2008

Rayburn House
Office Building, Room 2325

Bangladesh: The Upcoming National Elections, Pluralism,
Tolerance and the Plight of Hindu and Non-Muslim Minority - Need a New
Direction[1]

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Good Morning.

I thank the

Commission for inviting me to this hearing. I will focus my comments on treatment of Hindu and other non-Muslim minorities in Bangladesh and her prospect for tolerance and pluralism without which there cannot be any democracy. I have been working on these issues for over 25 years having authored several books and articles. I have brought a few of those for you to look at. *Empire's Last Casualty: Indian Subcontinent's Vanishing Hindu and Other Minorities* was released earlier this year, while *Living among the Believers: Stories from the holy Land Down the Ganges*, was released the year before is a collection of 18 short stories based on life of Hindu minority and of tolerant Muslims who are trying to protect them. *Empire's Last Casualty...* documents the loss of 49 million Hindus (minorities) from Bangladesh Census; and the politically-incorrect topic of Hindu casualty since 1947 Bengal partition. I also head a foundation that helps educate the poor and the orphaned in 22 schools, 14 in Bangladesh and 8 in India.

(Let me take this opportunity to invite our Ambassador and all of you to visit our schools as American people's generosity to Bangladesh. I have copies of our newsletter.) On one hand I love the beauty of the land, her traditional culture and warmth of individuals. I have taken tour groups there. Through my effort I have preserved one of her old heritage temples that is now listed in a UNESCO book. We have build half-a-dozen schools and dormitories. I am overwhelmed when we are welcomed by conch blowing, ululating, incense dancing and with matua songs. I am touched as they have named a home for the widowed and abandoned women after my wife and a college building after me. Yet I am saddened by the remorseless persecution of our indigenous Hindu minority - including for conch blowing, ululating or incense dancing - for their pre-Islamic culture, the heritage of all Bengali Muslims. I am also saddened by the denial of Hindu plights by a section of our elites, especially when vast majority killed for the independence were Hindus. Except for the hardcore pro-tolerant activists, writers, poets, journalists, editors and bulk of rural residents, a segment of elites are either unaware or unwilling to understand the depth of serious day-to-day harassment, humiliation and institutionalized discrimination directed towards Hindus, and their Buddhist, Christian and indigenous cousins. Almost on a daily basis I receive information from home about rape, forced conversion, murder, temple desecration or destruction, confiscation of properties, denial of jobs, many from newspapers, but no one is prosecuted. These I bet are a fraction of intolerant acts that take place on a daily basis. At the village, school or hostel level personal intimacy of majority and minority communities is great, but treatment of Hindus, Buddhists and Christians in faraway villages, schools and dorms tend to be that of malaun, namo and dhaindar bachha - derogatory insults we hear on a daily basis. At home journalists and activists are doing a fine job highlighting anti-Hindu acts, while being censored in the U.S. and in Indian media, especially in Bengali India. If Bengali India - West Bengal and Tripura - both run by Bangladeshi-Hindu refugee were a bit democratically minded and progressive in their outlook it could have helped Bangladesh. But the communal leaders masquerading as communist or leftist, who have chosen not to live with their Muslim-majority neighbors in their homeland, have supported oppression of our minorities either through censorship or silence as do their media.

In Bengali we have

a saying: jei jai lankai shei hoi rabon
or whosoever ascends the throne becomes a demon which amply describes the plight of Hindus in Bangladesh,

and this goes back to the days of 1947 partition when the united Bengal province of British India was governed by the Muslim

League Party. Make no mistake, Bangladesh's problem of democracy is not its anti-minority root, but in its shameless anti-Hindu core. Attack on Christians, Buddhists and indigenous peoples began only after plains and tribal Hindus have been decimated. Throughout her history, with changing focus, Hindu cleansing-(property) confiscation-killing and anti-Hindu apartheid, colonization of Chittagong hills, has been a constant feature with the anti-independence pro-extremist groups, pro-colonial anti-Hindu intolerant groups, segment of pro-independence nationalist groups, military and military-bureaucratic regimes - except 3 years of tolerant, secular rule of the Father of the Nation following 1971 independence. Even the Father retained the racist Hindu-oppression law of Enemy Property Act which allows confiscation of Hindu properties without notice and compensation by declaring them enemies of state; and he didn't allow rebuilding of the 9th Century Ramna Kali Temple where Islamists killed over 100 Hindus in 1971 before destroying the temple. These were extremely important anti-Hindu symbolism appeasing Islamists. Sadly he and his family paid with their lives for his mistakes.

In the 1990s when

an anti-independence pro-extremist group came to power by promising investigation and compensation of families affected by 1990 and 1992 anti-Hindu pogroms, once in power nothing changed while intensifying anti-Hindu apartheid by that I mean the ban on hiring of minorities in public service, military, police, foreign service, diplomatic corps, border guard and more. Not a week goes by when I do not hear complaints by minorities how they were denied jobs after passing entrance exam once their identity was known to recruiting bosses. (Note that the same Bangladeshi Hindus [refugees] are found as top ministers, diplomats, university presidents, U.N. delegates, military chiefs, legislators, assembly speakers, eminent scholars in far corners of non-Bengali India as well as in distant nations, but not in their own home!) Again when a pro-independence nationalist group came to power they too maintained that ban. They too chose not to appoint a single Hindu minister and ambassador although about 30% of their vote came from Hindus. They too retained the Enemy Property Act. Over 65% of confiscated Hindu properties were seized by their supporters allowing this immense illegal wealth transfer from the Hindus (see Abul Barkat's Vested Property book.) During a military regime in 1980s I saw a flicker of hope with decentralization of power, but once the regime came under threat they let loose anti-Hindu pogroms. When anti-independence pro-extremist and pro-colonial anti-Hindu intolerant groups came to power by ethnically cleansing Hindus during election no one was prosecuted for the crimes of Hindu-cleansing although Hindus and secularist Muslims demanded such action.

Earlier this year

during a trip through 12 districts we witnessed several interesting scenes. In one all-Hindu village there were long lines of people in festive mood - women in sindur on their scalp and white sankha wedding bangles and men in crisp dhuti garment - waiting to be registered as voters. For that rural community it was a sign of hope. I was upbeat, but I was reminded that the administration has maintained apartheid with no Hindu minority in the governance, and other practices of discrimination were retained in spite of the fact that the Administration has such talented individuals. Hindu-rapists, land confiscators, puja desecrators are not being prosecuted. Thankfully no pogrom has taken place in last two years. And they reminded me of perils of wearing sankha and dhuti beyond that all-Hindu area. At another place residents reminded me of perils of voting when in 2001 all the Hindu minorities were cleansed before election electing an opposition candidate whom I personally met to complain of this ethnic cleansing. Muslims and Hindus called this POBH or Perils of Being Hindu meaning non-Muslim. When the discussion of election came up Muslim majority and Hindu and non-Muslim minority views were from trepidation to downright fear. Many mentioned that "nothing is going to change," while both Muslims and Hindus were worried about the attack on minorities by "the other party." In one area residents reminded me that the entire Hindu community was target of violence by all groups active

in the area each blaming Hindus for their possible election loss. Such is the dilemma of average Bangladeshi. Yet there is no solution but to seek public mandate in a democracy under transparency.

One may ask, Can the State control violence and discrimination against Hindus, minorities and women? I believe apart from the element of anarchy State is able to control most of the violence. A short while ago when anti-independence and anti-Hindu groups were in power and a Hindu girl's dorm was about to be attacked we were able to stop that terror by talking to thana police. When a pro-independence group was in power we were able to liberate an ashram as the authorities removed an illegal mosque and returned illegally-held property confiscated by an Islamist group. The Member of Parliament I mentioned earlier who came to power after Hindu cleansing kept his promise "that no more attack will take place." When anti-independence, pro-extremist groups were in power they saved a historic Hindu shrine at my request that is now a national treasure. A few years ago when my Hindu attorney's son was beheaded because they did not give up their property and move to India, I pleaded with the government for a trial of the murderers, which they speedily conducted convicting many killers. I do not claim that they acted because of my pleading, but the father of the murder victim thought that it had something to do with that trial. (Actually Congressman Crowley was a big help. He met with the father of the murder victim at Dhakeswari Hindu Temple in Dhaka.) So it can be done, when State wants it.

To sum up here are some thoughts on the possibility of a transparent, democratic election and what needs to be done before and after election:

Impartial election be held with observers from Bangladesh Civil Society, U.S., Europe, India especially Bengali-Indians and expatriates speaking Bengali; A protocol of protecting minorities before and after election must be developed now, before the election. This is urgent; Punishment for election-terrorists must be spelled out by the international and expatriate community; All political parties, including religious parties, must pledge to nominate Hindu, Buddhists, Christians, Ahmedias and tribes as well as women as their candidate; Hindus, minorities and Muslims who are victims of ethnic cleansing should be allowed to return and vote; Before election political parties must pledge to appoint ministers from minority communities in the new government. Discrimination against Hindus, minorities and women must be noted by USCIRF and other pro-democracy institutions. Tolerance and intolerance can not exist side-by-side in a democracy; Victims of violence of past elections, including rape victims, must be compensated; Perpetrators of past election violence, including rape, must be brought to justice. There must not be a blanket pardon; A special court needs to be set up for speedy trial of rapists, election-terrorists, and property confiscators; Pledges should be sought from political parties that the restriction of hiring of minorities be lifted or in other words minorities must be fully integrated in police, army, diplomacy, air force, border security, judiciary, civil and local administration. This will strengthen democracy and pluralism; Discriminatory, apartheid-making oral exam must be eliminated; All parties must pledge that land confiscated from

Hindus through Enemy Property Act must be returned, reparation paid and perpetrators prosecuted. All past governments failed in this promise. This racist law must be abolished. As you all know that this law is so racist that it could not be used against the killers of presidents because they were Muslim, but was used even against the father of the idea of the Bengali nation Mr. Dhiren Dutta who first demanded in Pakistani Parliament that Bengali be made the national language and that love for Bengali created the nation. But after Pakistan murdered him during 1971 Liberation War his homestead was declared enemy property by the new nation because POBH, or being Hindu. It would be like Jefferson's home being declared enemy property by the U.S. Government; Pledges from political parties should be sought before election that once elected, for reasons of symbolism and substance, a number of high-profile state positions be filled by Hindu and other minorities - president, prime minister, home minister, chief justice, army, navy or air force chief, major party leadership or similar positions; In Constitution equal rights for all religions must be re-enshrined; Decolonization and autonomy of Chittagong Hill Tracts be established; Schooling in tribal mother languages be vigorously pursued; Immediate return of lands belonging to Ramna Kali Temple and Ma Anandomoyee Ashram (in Dhaka); And lastly, a final resolution must be made for the trial of mass murders of 1971 War with trial of war criminals bringing a final closure and ushering in a new democracy.

Personally I know thousands of individuals who are tolerant, secular, patriotic and independence-loving - in and out of government. They like their Hindus to stay in their homeland of thousands of years. I strongly believe that political parties pledging these points will receive support from all Bangladeshis, including Hindu and other minorities. And without minority cooption there can not be a viable democracy. These pledges will usher in a pluralistic, tolerant, prosperous, democratic nation, a symbol of success in the developing world, among Muslim-majority nations and a leader in the Indian Subcontinent.

With that let me end here. I will be happy to answer any question.

Thanks.

[1] I will be happy to provide documentation of data/incidents related to my statements.