

The Practice of Secularism in Bangladesh: India's Relevance

Adil Ahamed. M¹, Muthu Balaje. G²

¹Assistant Professor of Political Science, The central Law College

²Assistant Professor of Sociology, The Central Law College

Abstract

Secularism is considered a signature of progressiveness in the emerging world order. In most democracies, secularism is adopted as an inherent principle of democracy. Democracy became the symbol of modernity after the second world war in 1945. It is more pertinent to Western states. South Asian states also could not escape from the world of modernity and followed the democratic form of government. South Asian region is known for its love of culture and tradition which the people are following for centuries. Since Democracy without Secularism is like flesh without bone South Asian states adhere to the secular principle. Balancing their traditional values like religion and culture along with the progressive principle of secularism became the biggest challenge for South Asian states. One of the South Asian states which is more vulnerable to communal riots is Bangladesh. The problem of secularism is the biggest challenge in Bangladesh due to the continuous attacks on religious minorities. Along with internal factors, the activity of the Indian government is an external factor for the communal tensions in Bangladesh. This study aims to discuss the religious persecution against minorities in Bangladesh with special reference to the communal violence that happened in 2021 and 2024. The significance of this study is to analyse the India factor on the neighbouring issue and discuss how India is relevant to the communal violence that happened in Bangladesh. This study aims to explain the similar pattern of violence which is happening in both states against minorities in which Hindus in Bangladesh will be replaced with Muslims in India.

Keywords: Citizenship Amendment Act, Communal Violence, Persecution Religion, Secularism.

THE PRACTICE OF SECULARISM IN BANGLADESH: INDIA'S RELEVANCE

Religious freedom is one of the most important freedoms expected to be enjoyed by a common man. Freedom to worship god based on the human conscience is a basic human freedom that must be enjoyed by common men in the modern world. When a state which is administered by any form of government intends to affiliate itself with a particular faith or ideology tends to persecute the people who follow a faith different from the state faith this is called religious persecution. Religious persecution mostly targets minorities who form a minimal number of the entire population. Though religious persecution is attributed to Islamic countries, theocratic states, and authoritarian governments persecutions are found in any type of government that believes in homogeneity. India, a democratic secular country, enshrined their secular principle in Articles 25 to 28 which deals with freedom of religion (India). But the question of the hour is does that provide religious freedom in practice? Well, it is not so religious persecutions are evident in recent years against religious minorities even in democracies (Copson, 2017).

Significance Of the Study:

Persecutions of religious minorities can be well-founded in most Asian countries. Bangladesh is one among them where religious minorities are facing tough life ever since they got liberated from West Pakistan. This study aims to explain the religious persecution that happened in Bangladesh with special reference to recent human rights violations against minorities in the year 2021 during the Durga puja festival (Hasan, 2021). This study aims to analyse why minorities are more vulnerable to persecution in Bangladesh, the role played by India being a vital player in the formation of Bangladesh, and India's relevance in the violence that happened in 2021 (Delwar, 2021).

Methodology:

The method adopted for the research was a descriptive, historical, explanatory, analytical, and qualitative method. Data were collected from secondary sources such as books, articles, newspaper, and media files.

Constitutional Status of Secularism:

The secular principle enshrined in the constitution of Bangladesh is like the Indian constitution (Government, 1994). Though the constitution declared Bangladesh as a secular state in 1972 under the leadership of Mujeeb-Ur-Rahman it was made to be an Islamic state in the year 1988. The constitution protected the rights of the Hindus, Christians, and Buddhists who formed the minority population of the state. The constitution ensured the rights of citizens to profess, propagate and practice any religion. Rights were provided to the religion to establish religious institutions. Rights to refrain from religious instruction from educational institutions were also enshrined in the constitution. The constitution also prohibited the state to provide any political status in favour of any religion. The constitution prohibited any association formed with the motive of creating disturbance to the secular nature of the state (Government, 1994).

The Decline of Secularism in Bangladesh:

Bangladesh is often called a model Muslim-majority country that attributes itself to a state religion called Islam from 1988. Bangladesh takes pride in its syncretic fabric; it has a spiritual commitment to Islam and a cultural affiliation to being a Bengali state. In 1971 it was separated from West Pakistan. In 1972 it declared itself a secular state. It was the first and only Muslim-majority country in South Asia to enshrine secularism in its constitution. The word secularism was adopted in their preamble as a fundamental principle of law. Maybe the adoption of the secular principle was to make a good relationship with India and pretend to follow the lines of India. India could have acquired the territory of Bangladesh as a territory of India but India refrained from that hoping that Bangladesh would follow the secular and democratic principle. But in 1978, within 7 years of the establishment of the state and its secular principle, Bangladesh made an unexpected move. Under the dictatorship of Ziaur-Rahman, the government of Bangladesh removed the word secularism from the constitution and replaced it with a new phrase: “**absolute trust and faith in almighty Allah.**” In 1988 Muhammad Irshad a follower of Rahman's principle of making an Islamic country went a step further and declared Islam a state religion. These two dictator rulers of Bangladesh resorted to Islam religion as they felt that will legitimize their power. They made Bangladesh like Pakistan as a theocratic state. The rulers who came after wanted to follow the democratic principle but never tried to include the word secularism in the constitution. The separation of state from religion is highly promoted by many leaders in Bangladesh but if we look at the practice it is not so. It has never been practiced in the past or the present. Islam was retained as a state religion and that made the constitutional

position of secularism meaningless. The idea of secularism as it was committed by the state in 1972 was diluted over the years. On one hand, the state formulated laws based on religion, and on the other hand, religious groups formed by the people wanted to show their dominance. The Muslim association never wanted the state to follow the principle of secularism. These groups through madrasas which is a religious educational institution of Islam spread the idea of majoritarianism and influenced education policy. For example, in 2017 there was even a change in textbooks where Bengali chapters were removed with the replacement of Islamic texts. (Uddin, 2006)

Religious population in Bangladesh an overview:

Around 89% of the Bangladesh population is formed by Sunni Muslims 10% of the population belongs Hindu religion and the remaining fewer population is comprised of predominantly Christians of Roman Catholics and Buddhists who belong to the Hinayana sect. There are other non-citizen populations too. Rohingyas form the majority of the non-citizen population who fled from the neighbouring state of Myanmar and living a life of refugees in Bangladesh. There are also different sects within the Muslim population like Shia Muslims, Ahmadi Muslims, animists, etc. (Uddin, 2006)

Minorities persecution in the Past:

Since 2012 every year religious persecution against minorities is happening somewhere in Bangladesh because of some false allegations of blasphemy against Hindus. A human rights organization based in Bangladesh reported that more than 3600 incidents have happened in the last 10 years. The year 2012 can be marked by the emergence of the most-used social media platform which is Facebook. The moment a rumour is created it will start to flow like a wave around social media and reaches the common people who do not have the patience to think and act. The rumours will be mostly social media posts in which there will be a defaming depiction of Islam or the prophet Muhammad. The Muslim majority starts their violence due to the prejudice they have against their fellow Hindus. There is a common theme that can be found in the past violence that happened in Bangladesh. The common theme is a local person belonging to the Muslim community will start a false allegation about minorities as defaming the faith of Islam. This is the common factor but three other factors are responsible for communal violence. (Mazumdar, 2021)

First is the rise of atheism and blasphemy among the Muslim community itself. Muslims in Bangladesh have become disbelievers of God and conservative Islamism feels that this is happening because of the non-Muslims present there. There is also a belief in Islam that towards the end of the world, there will be a rise in atheism. This insecurity created a strong sense of enmity against the Hindus and other minorities in Bangladesh

Secondly, India to some extent is responsible for this. India is even relevant to the violence that happened in 2021. India being a secular country started to divert from this principle and move in line with the ideology of the Bhartiya Janata Party which is Hindutva. Since Bangladesh prime minister Sheikh Hasina has a good relationship with Indian prime minister Narendra Modi Muslim majoritarian in Bangladesh are provoked and started to develop anti – Hindu sentiments and create violence against minorities as they are supportive of India.

Thirdly, politics has a vital role to play in this continuous violence against minorities. Sheikh Hasina a strong political leader in Bangladesh almost neutralized most of her opponents in politics. Now the situation is like Sheikh Hasina is almost a single leader in Bangladesh. Thus, communal violence is created by unhealthy opponents to destroy the prestige of her political career. (Iqtidar, 2011)

In the last 4 years around 20 Hindu families have been attacked by Muslims in Bangladesh (Battacharjee, 2021). Before 2021 it was a 2014 attack that was brutal where many houses, temples, and idols were vandalized. Sexual brutality happened against Hindu women and children in the year 2014. However, 2021 replaces 2014 to be the deadliest attack on minorities in Bangladesh. (Agarwal, 2021)

Communal violence during Durga Puja; 2021:

Comilla is one of the largest cities in Bangladesh with a population of more than 6 million. This southeastern city has been always known for its culture and heritage but in recent years tensions between the Muslim majority and religious minorities have been on the rise. This is where it all started on 13 October 2021 in the heart of the city which is around 150 kilometres from the capital city of Dhaka. On 13 October around 3 AM, a middle-aged named Iqbal Hossain placed the holy book of Islam which is the Quran on the lap of lord hanuman's statue which was prepared for the festival. When people came and saw that in the morning, they became angry and enraged at that visual. The police came and took the book out. It was again the social media platform Facebook which was used as the medium to spread enmity between communities through which someone posted a Livestream along with the enraged people. This live post agitated the other Muslims in that area and they vandalized the temple. They also vandalized some other temples in the city and very soon there were clashes between the two communities and between people and the police. The violence started to spread in other parts of the country mostly in the southern part. Chandpur, Noakhali, Chatto gram, Bandar ban, Coxs Bazar, Narshingdi, and Gazipur were the areas where violence was prevalent. At least 70 puja temples, 30 houses, and 50 shops owned by the Hindus were vandalized. During the clash between people and police at least 7 people have been killed which includes 5 Hindus and 2 Muslims. All these happened during the 3 days of the puja festival. Violence continued even after the puja is over in one of the northern villages of the country 18 houses were burned (Agarwal, 2021).

Though there are claims that the police could have started earlier to stop the people in the Comilla incident the police have had been hard on the protesters. They tried to stop the violence and damage. Along with police other armed forces like paramilitary forces and border guards were also deployed. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina condemned the attack and ordered tough actions against communal rioters. She has also raised the flag to her neighbouring counterpart saying that India should also be careful about the communal violence happening in India because that has proved to be a factor in what happened in Bangladesh. Sheikh Hasina promised that whoever was responsible for the violence will not be spared (Agarwal, 2021).

Initially, the protest was all on social media but later to end the violence peaceful protest and marches have been organized by the members of the Awami League who condemned the spread of violence and promised Hindu minorities will be protected under the leadership of Sheikh Hasina. Marches were also carried out by various student wings from Dhaka University in support of minorities demanding their protection and demanded enforcement of the law on the perpetrators. Sheikh Hasina promised that the freedom of worship will be protected for the Hindus as well as Muslims (Agarwal, 2021).

Religious Violence in 2024:

The Fall of Shiek Hasina's regime on August 5, 2024 which was an outcome of protests and violence erupted over reservation system followed by religious persecution of minorities took a new turn when Chinmoy Krishna Das was arrested on November 25, 2024 in Bangladesh. Chinmoy Krishna Das is a spokesperson of Bangladesh's Sanatan Jagaran manch and head of pundri kadam in Chittagong. He was

sent to jail on sedition case for disrespecting the national flag of Bangladesh. It was followed by protest by Hindu minorities demanding his release. The protest followed by persecutions of minorities and destruction of Hindu temples in Bangladesh. It has been confirmed that 88 cases of communal violence targeting minorities since the departure of Shiek Hasina. Yunus government have promised to secure the safety of Hindu minorities after the violence has been condemned by Indian government.

India's relevance: Analysis

India had shown great concern about violence happening against Hindu minorities. Politicians, leaders, and other members of the Bhartiya Janata Party asked for the direct intervention of Narendra Modi. India is not only a neighbouring state but also a state which played and continues to play a vital role in Bangladeshi politics. As we discussed earlier India and its relationship with Bangladesh has also been relevant factor in the persecution of minorities.

When it comes to South Asian states there are few things in common; a colonial past; religious sensitivity and so on. This kind of religious sensitivity and love for culture and tradition cannot be seen in Western countries in this century. Anything which happens in South Asian states will have a connection to the neighbouring states because of the shared history and religious consciousness. It can be both an external factor and a consequence somewhere there will be a regional connection. Speaking of Bangladesh, it has more to do with India and Pakistan. The partition idea based on religion by Britain is a deep scar created by colonial rulers. India is a Hindu majority state with other religions as minorities and Pakistan along with Bangladesh erstwhile east Pakistan with Muslim majority population and other religions as minorities. The common minorities among these three states are Christians, Buddhists, Jains, and Sikhs. Exception and issues come from two major religion Hinduism and Islam which wants to form their homogenous state. This is where the people and the state started to find commonality within their borders. Since commonality exceeds the border problems arising out of this lust for uniformity, commonality or homogeneity exceeds the border. This is how India as a neighbouring state is a factor in the communal violence happening in Bangladesh.

Being the economic centre of South Asia India is attributed with the biggest state in this region. So, any happening in India will have great effort in this region predominantly the neighbouring states. Bangladesh has a cultural and political link with India. After the independence of Bangladesh from Pakistan with the help of India in 1971, a strong bilateral relationship has been growing between India and Bangladesh for the past 50 years. In recent years there is a shift from the democratic and secular principles of India where the largest democracy is moving towards an authoritative democracy. After the formation of the BJP government in 2014 laws and policies focussed more on religious lines with the motive of nationalism. This idea of nationalism leaned much on Hinduism which in recent times is popularly known as Hindutva. It has proved to be a big threat to India's bilateral relations which are being eroded mainly with Muslim-majority states. Anti – Muslim laws, mob lynching, hate speeches, attacks on Muslims, etc have created a dark mark on India where it has received criticisms not only from Islamic countries but also from international organizations and Western countries.

India's Citizenship amendment act of 2019 - CAA is seen as a controversial act that discriminated against Muslims by providing citizenship only for non-Muslim refugees from neighbouring Muslim states (Sinha). It was seen as a great deviation from democratic principles. India never cared about the adverse consequences in the neighbouring states. To add more fuel to the fire the national register of citizens targeted the Bengali-speaking Muslims in Assam. This initiative by India tried to push back the Bengali

Muslims to Bangladesh terming them illegal migrants. This initiative agitated the Muslims from Bangladesh. The way chosen by Bangladesh Muslims to show their opposition was violence against innocent Hindu minorities and sexual violence against Hindu women. When Narendra Modi visited Bangladesh in March 2021 protests erupted in major parts of Bangladesh. The Muslim majority population is not happy with Sheikh Hasina being a pro-Indian thus they wanted to create communal violence as a part of the opposition to what is happening to Muslims in India. So communal violence that happened in 2021 during the Durga puja festival cannot be confined to the territory of Bangladesh itself but must cross borders and be visualized with a wider lens. The issues in Bangladesh should not be seen as an isolated event as India has an equal role to play in that. South Asian states should be happy that they must get rid of a scar that has been exploiting them for 200 years but they should also be cautious about the trap which has strengthened the partition lines of religion.

"Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny" – Martin Luther King, jr

Conclusion:

The 2024 violence is just the latest instance and it has prompted many in Bangladesh to restore the secularism of the 1972 constitution. We must wait for the feasibility of the restoration. Perpetrators destabilized Sheikh Hasina's government, trying to create a rift between India and Bangladesh, and bring Islamic supremacy to Bangladesh. Thus, there is no guarantee that the restoration of secular principles will end the challenges of Bangladesh. A collective responsibility from India and Bangladesh is vital for bringing peace to Bangladesh and peace to India itself. Let us hope that any state in the world will respect the heterogenous faiths and embrace pluralism.

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