

The cycle of violence against minorities in Bangladesh

by Subrata Banarjee

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Women protest vandalism of Hindu temples, Baliadangi, north-west Bangladesh, 9 August 2024.

Photo Credit: Piyas Manas

Recent attacks, the looting of shops and houses, vandalism and arson at monasteries and temples have left members of **minority groups in Bangladesh terrified**. Since independence in 1971, a recurring cycle of torture and oppression against minorities has continued to tear at the heart of the country. It raises the question: why does this violence persist in a state that claims to have an undifferentiated social system and inclusive policies? The recent wave of violence has once again brought these concerns to the forefront, shedding light on the lack of security for minorities.

After **the downfall** of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on 5 August, there have been at least **200 attacks** against religious minorities across 52 districts. According to the **latest census undertaken in 2022** by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, the percentage of citizens identifying as Muslim is 91.04% and those identifying as Hindu is 7.95%. Other minorities include Christians, 0.30%, Buddhists, 0.61% and other religious groups are at 0.12% of the population.



Vandalism of a Hindu temple in Thakurgaon district, Bangladesh during civil unrest following the resignation of the country's prime minister. Credit: Bakul Chandra Barman.

Thousands of people belonging to minority groups rallied in public protests across the country to demonstrate against the attacks and demand justice. **A large protest was held** in the Shahbag neighbourhood of the capital city, Dhaka, on August 10. Images in this blog were provided by Bakul Chandra Barman, President of the Bangladesh Koch-Rajbongshi-Barman Organization. The images show attacks and protests in Thakurgaon district, located in the north-west corner of the country, close to the Indian border. (It should be noted that many Hindus also acknowledge and appreciate the efforts of the university students who initiated the movement to overthrow the government and other Muslim members of the community who have shown **solidarity for minorities**, actively protecting temples and houses.)



Protests against minority violence in Baliadangi, Bangladesh, 9 August 2024. Credit: Piyas Manas.

Violence against minorities is not a recent development in Bangladesh. They have been subject to **fear and uncertainty** whenever political change has occurred. The severity of this horror cannot be overstated. For many people, the recent violence in Bangladesh has brought back painful memories of the country's 1971 War of Independence against Pakistan. Violence against the Hindu community has been experienced in more recent times, specifically in 1992, 2001, 2013 and 2022.

In 1992, more than 300 Hindu temples were set on fire in Bangladesh **in retaliation for the Babri Masjid being destroyed** in India. Additionally, incidents of rape and robbery targeting minority families occurred.

In 2001, the minority community experienced violence following the national elections. Genocide, abduction, rape, forced conversion, extortion, and property seizures were all prevalent during that time – more than 18,000 incidents of violence were recorded in total. Shockingly, **200 Hindu women were gang-raped** in a single night in Bhola's Char Fashion. Purnima Rani, who served as a polling agent for the Awami League candidate during the 2001 national elections, was gang-raped **by members of the opposing party**. This horrific incident not only instilled fear among minorities but also sent shockwaves throughout the entire country.

Fake news has been a major challenge for the country over the last decade. In 2013, 50 Hindu houses and temples in Pabna district's Sathia upazila in the western part of the country were **attacked, vandalized, and set on fire**. These attacks were motivated by false charges of religious insult. Again in 2021, Amnesty International

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reported that violence over minorities erupted in Bangladesh following allegations on social media with fake news of people dishonouring religion in the northern district of Cumilla, resulting in at least **seven individuals being killed and hundreds more injured**. At least 25 Hindu-owned houses and shops were set on fire in Rangpur.

Attempts to quantify the issue within the country include reports by Ain o Salish Kendra, a Bangladeshi human rights organisation, which document at least **3,679 incidents affecting the Hindu community** from January 2013 to September 2021, including vandalism, arson, and targeted violence. The Bangladesh National Hindu Grand Alliance claim the violence has **continued into 2022**, with reports from that year alone including 154 people from minority communities killed and 39 women raped. In addition to violence, at least 89,990 acres of land belonging to minority communities were encroached upon, 572 families evicted from their plots of land and 445 families forced to migrate.

It is not only Hindus who have been the target of violent attacks. In September 2012, according to officials, hundreds of protesters in southern Bangladesh set fire to at least **10 Buddhist temples and 2,100 homes**. Allegations were made against the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, Jamaat, and Awami League for their involvement in the burning of Buddhist temples in Ramur.

The national government led by Hasina during this period failed to address these allegations and deliver justice to victims. Due to this ongoing terror, minorities have lost their sense of belonging. From 1974 to 2022, the percentage of the Hindu community in Bangladesh decreased from 13.5% to 7.9%, according to **census figures**.



Protests calling for protection of marginalised communities in Baliadangi, Bangladesh, 9 August 2024. Credit: Piyas Manas.

The political parties must take responsibility for the ongoing torture of minorities in independent Bangladesh. It is the government's duty to ensure the safety of every person in a free country. The Bangladesh National Party and Jamaat have never adopted any policies sensitive to minorities in their party platforms; instead, **they have supported oppression**. Similarly, while Sheikh Hasina's government received support for her sensitivity towards minorities, her government has failed to prosecute the perpetrators of incidents in the last 17 years. This failure serves as significant evidence that the Awami League was also not a safe option for the minority community.

In response to recent attacks, during a visit to Dhakeshwari Temple in Dhaka on 13 August, Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus, the chief advisor of the interim government, **provided encouraging reassurance about the safety of minorities** and emphasized the importance of equal rights. Yunus urged the Hindu community to embrace their identity as Bangladeshi citizens rather than a separate community. Significant meetings have also taken place between Muslim and Hindu representatives across the country, with a specific focus on promoting unity and addressing communal concerns. In some cases, additionally, there has been the promise of legal action against any recent vandalism and attacks on minorities.

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However, to build a discrimination-free, non-sectarian, happy, prosperous, and developed Bangladesh, the state must act quickly to take structural measures to prevent these acts of oppression. All incidents should be swiftly investigated and prosecuted. A culture of impunity only fosters criminal behaviour; therefore legislation should be enacted to protect minority rights, identify minority communities across the country and enhance security measures in those areas. Actions should be taken to support minorities in all aspects, including driving change through the education system. Children should be taught to display tolerant, inclusive, and non-discriminatory behaviour towards people of diverse backgrounds — including different religions, castes, genders, and sexualities — starting from the level of early education and through the schooling system.

The student movement leading the revolution to oust the prime minister is **only the first step** toward our dream of creating a unified and harmonious Bangladesh.

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