

Majoritarian State and the Marginalised Minorities: The Hindus in Bangladesh

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Abstract: The problem confronting the Hindu minority in Bangladesh is analysed in this article within the framework of a majoritarian state, which embodies the socio-cultural ethos of the majority community in its effort to establish itself as a nation state with a unique history. Such a state by its very nature marginalises the minorities, who are considered unequal in the construction of the 'nation state' narrative even though constitutionally they enjoy equality as citizens. While the article looks at the role of the Hindus in politics in former East Pakistan and later in Bangladesh, it also explores whether the approach adopted by the Hindu minority in recent years has provided physical security, economic and political opportunities, and made them important stakeholders. The article also analyses the future of minorities in the context of the larger national identity debate in Bangladesh.

Introduction

The discourse on the nation state in South Asia has always made partition based on the two-nation theory a reference point. This justifies the discrimination of minorities on the basis of the creation of an exclusive state and crafts a narrative based on 'us' and 'them'. The creation of Bangladesh in 1971 questioned the rationale of religion as the basis of a state. Nevertheless, soon after its liberation the state moved from being a state for Bengalis to a state for Bengali Muslims. Such a sectarian conception of nationhood turned minorities—especially Hindus—into the 'other'. The increasingly polarised debate, bitterly contested between secular Bengali nationalists who consider the Hindus as their cultural and linguistic compatriots, and the religious Right who argued for a Bengali Muslim state (and regarded Hindus as their ideological 'other'), made the position of the minorities vulnerable. The shifting of boundaries of the nation from language to religion placed the Hindus in an unenviable position. The onset of democracy in Bangladesh relegated them to the status of a 'vote bank', to be sought only during elections or, at best, as part of the ideological contestation. The term 'minority' is a construction of the nation state, which defines its identity on the basis of certain ethno-cultural diacritics, having a majoritarian bias embedded in the context of state formation. Democracy in any state based on an exclusive identity only accentuates majoritarianism.

The position of Hindu minorities is significant in the larger context of state formation and is deeply connected to the issue of secularism and pluralism in Bangladesh.

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contradictory to the principles of democracy. Diversity of religion, language and opinion are an essential part of democratic culture. Thus, it was not surprising that the Jamaat and Chattra Shibir (the student organisation of Jamaat) elements targeted the Hindus, an essential component of the plural and secular Bangladesh that they are opposed to. The attacks on the background of the Shahbag movement and the verdict on Delwar Hossain Sayeedi's conviction clearly underlined how political parties perceived them, from the point of view of the ideological divide.¹ An analyst has argued that 'minority does not necessarily have to do with numbers, but is rather a matter of status, role and, more importantly access to power and resources';² but numbers remain an important bargaining tool in a democracy. Votes are a source of political empowerment for the otherwise religious and culturally marginalised community. Democracy also requires political mobilisation; thus, the symbols political regimes use, the history they tailor and the cultures they favour and promote, have an unmistakable majoritarian tilt.

Bangladesh provides a unique case of how a state that was founded on the basis of secularism transited to become a state that believes in the primacy of the religion earlier rejected. This politics of majority, restrained the state based on a majoritarian primordial identity to emulate plural values. This is evident from the limited implementation of the Supreme Court order, that had declared constitutional amendments introduced by the military dictator as null-and-void.³ Given the pre-eminence of religion in the constitution, even professedly secular parties feel reluctant to defend the equal rights of minorities publicly; when they do, they wrap it in majoritarian language by justifying their approach as sanctified by Islam, usually quoting relevant text from the scriptures. The question is: How have the minorities resisted majoritarianism? How has the 'vote bank' politics made minorities vulnerable and how has the minority organisation become an appendage to the political parties? This study focuses on Hindu minority which is numerically the largest in Bangladesh, constituting 8.5 per cent of the population.⁴ Unlike other minorities in Bangladesh, their presence is seen in the context of the two partitions (1947 and 1971); the first based on the two-nation theory and the second on the issue of secularism and linguistic nationalism. They are also perceived as the 'fifth columnist', given the India factor in Bangladesh politics. They are critically poised on the issue of contested nationalism (religion versus secular) in Bangladesh.

The word 'marginalised' has been deliberately used, as it encapsulates the minority politics in Bangladesh which is seen within the majoritarian construction of nation state.⁵ To quote Rupert Emerson, 'In a nationalist age, even when all are citizens, all citizens by no means of equal value' . . . there are 'barriers which may divide the citizen of the state from the nation which gives the state its modern meaning'.⁶ The minorities in Bangladesh have tried to protect the political and cultural space for themselves since 1947. It needs to be clarified that the Hindu community in Bangladesh is not a homogeneous group. They are geographically dispersed and are divided on the basis of caste. They are also divided on the basis of their political beliefs and lack uniformity in approach to the state and politics. However, they hold similar views on the issue of religious and cultural freedom and feel that secularism is a necessity for an equal state. This article tries to examine the approach of a majoritarian state⁷ towards the minorities and their response.

This article is organised into six sections. The first section examines the role played by the Hindu political leaders to constitutionally safeguard their rights in a Pakistan which defined itself as an Islamic state. The second section analyses politics post

ties in post-1950 electoral politics. The fourth section deals with the emergence of Hindu minority organisations and their politics. The fifth section focuses on the fifteenth amendment and underlines how the state continues to be guided by majoritarian impulses and has established constitutionally the hegemony of the majority, which has several implications for the minorities. The concluding section examines the political, social and cultural dilemmas faced by Hindus and how majoritarianism impinges on the issue of equal citizenship. The central argument of this article is that a state based on the identity of the majority community by its very construction is inherently hegemonic. The state's promotion of majoritarian biases, as a part of its self-definition as a nation state, inherently makes the political and social rights of the minorities secondary. No amount of state protection will provide them with a sense of security and belonging, as their rights flow from a patronising mind-set.

This study is based on social enquiry approach. Both primary and secondary sources in English and Bengali languages have been consulted. Extensive interviews with the Hindu minority population (belonging to various professions, i.e., businessmen, professors, people engaged in government jobs) and Hindu students hailing from different parts of Bangladesh some of whom are living in hostels provided by their educational institutes, have been conducted to understand the problem. Though the majority of the student interviewees are temporary residents of Dhaka, they see their social roots as being in the village which they often frequent, even on weekends.

The role of the Hindu minorities in the post-partition period: a convergence of Bengali interest

The partition of the subcontinent, rather than settling the communal question, reopened it. The presence of religious minorities in India and Pakistan made the partition a reference point. The Hindu minorities were regarded as 'enemies' since Pakistan was created as a state exclusively for the Muslims. Hindus, for their part, were aware of the inherent limitation of citizenship in a country that was founded on religion. However, Jinnah's oft-quoted inaugural address to the Pakistan Constituent Assembly—in which he said, 'in the course of time, Hindus will cease to be Hindus, and the Muslims will cease to be Muslims, not in religious sense because that is the personal faith of the individual, but in political sense as citizens of one nation'—gave hope to the Hindus.⁸ Quoting Jinnah, the minorities argued for equal rights and a non-sectarian state. The life of Hindus in Pakistan began 'in an atmosphere of communal hatred, distrust and disgrace', as Pakistan moved from being a state for Muslims to an 'Islamic' state. Further, the mass migration of Hindus in the wake of communal riots made the minorities who opted to stay even more vulnerable.⁹

The Hindus were the major land-owning class in East Pakistan before partition. In the urban centres, caste-Hindus owned 85 per cent of buildings and properties.¹⁰ The resettlement of Muslim refugees became the priority of the Pakistan state, and it did not hesitate to resettle them in properties belonging to Hindus, and without offering any compensation. For example, the Requisition of Property Act 1948 ensured that Hindu migrants did not leave with valuable assets.¹¹ Legally, a small amount was allowed to be taken with them, but after the completion of elaborate legal formalities.¹² The Hindus of East Pakistan were hugely affected. The Nehru–Liaquat Pact of 1950 tried to assuage the minorities by jointly assuring equal citizenship and security while ruling out exchange of population.¹³ Because of the communal situation, some Hindus migrated to India leaving their relatives in Pakistan to manage

then Hindus were migrating as a part of the Hindu conspiracy to make the new nation weak.¹⁴ Old agrarian patron–client relations were invoked to create an atmosphere of hate and distrust between the two communities. The Pakistani state’s construction of a national identity also contributed to this mistrust.¹⁵ India was not receptive to the migration of the Hindus from East Pakistan and denied them refugee status, expecting them to go back.¹⁶ Later, the Pakistan government, through various laws enacted in 1949, 1952 and 1957, took over Hindu properties. It barred the Courts from looking into the actions of the Evacuee Property Management Committee. Furthermore, the 1964 Disturbed Persons Rehabilitation Ordinance prevented Hindus from selling their property and in 1965 the Enemy Property Act targeted the Hindus exclusively.

The Hindus in East Pakistan made efforts to ward off popular misconceptions, and tried to organise themselves both politically and socially. They participated in the debates in the Constituent Assembly (CA) and attempted to assuage the feelings of the Muslim members belonging to the League, insisting that they considered Pakistan their home and were completely loyal towards the new state. For the Hindus, the relevance of the ‘two-nation theory’ was limited to the creation of Pakistan.

To delink themselves from the Congress politics of the past and to establish a new political identity, the necessity of forming another party was felt.¹⁷ The *Pakistan Gana Samity* was formed on July 18, 1948 in Comilla. Membership of this party was open to all, irrespective of caste, creed and religion. The party only managed to draw a few members from the Forward Bloc and the Pakistan Socialist Party. Later, a faction of the erstwhile Congress party in East Pakistan, which was reluctant to join this new party, named itself the Pakistan National Congress. Both the parties failed to attract any Muslim members to their fold, as they primarily aimed to preserve minority interests.

Initially, the Pakistan state tried to demarcate and ghetto-ise the political aspirations of the minorities, suggesting that Pakistan should be declared an Islamic state and proposing a separate electorate for the minorities. With the support of Bengali Muslim members from East Pakistan, the Hindus resisted this attempt. A Hindu member of the CA argued, ‘Do not bring in the bitter memories of the old conflicts in the Constitution, by naming the State in the proposed way. This will perpetuate the history of the struggle for getting a homeland for Muslims in the Constitution’.¹⁸ The 1956 constitution made exclusive provision, allowing only a Muslim as the president of Pakistan.¹⁹ The Hindu members felt that such a provision would relegate the minorities to the status of second-class citizens.²⁰ Arguing for a joint electorate, the Hindus said that amity and peace between the communities could be established only when both of the communities voted for each other.²¹ The Bengali Muslims were supportive of their demands. H.S. Suhrawardy, the former prime minister of Pakistan, argued: ‘believe me, if you call them disloyal you cannot expect loyalty from them’.²² The Muslim members from West Pakistan were not amenable to the support extended by the Bengali Muslim members of the CA, labeling them agents of Hindus. Suhrawardy said:

. . . if we for instance plead something which we consider in the interest of Pakistan and which also coincides with the views of Hindus, papers come out with the news that we are playing in the hands of India and the Communists; if we have cooperation with the Hindus, and we are disliked because the Hindus are disliked. . . .²³

The post-partition politics and the growing differences between the leaders of East and West Pakistan saw the convergence of the Hindu and Muslim interests in East

interests of both the communities converged. The demand to make Bengali a national language in East Pakistan was first raised by D.N. Dutta, a member of the CA from East Pakistan. He was supported by the Bengali Muslims. The Pakistani state however labeled them saboteurs and enemy agents.²⁴ This did not endear them to the West Pakistani elites, who resented such cooperation.

Although the Pakistan state structure wanted to alienate the Hindus by selectively targeting them, the Bengali Muslims saw them as their cultural compatriots, essentially an inseparable component of the composite Bengali identity. Since India was referred to as the 'enemy', the Hindus also became enemy agents, whose persecution was necessary to secure the state interests both in terms of 'identity' and 'security'. They were targeted during the liberation war and 90 per cent of Hindu households became the focus of a Pakistani backlash.²⁵ Over the period 1964–1991, it was estimated that 5.3 million Hindus, or 538 persons each day, went missing, with as much as 703 persons going missing per day from 1964–1971.²⁶

The emergence of Bangladesh: regeneration of hope

The 1972 constitution, based on four foundational principles, instilled hope in Hindu minorities and offered the assurance of a dignified life based on equality. The first five-year plan clearly argued in favour of secularism in Bangladesh. It reads:

The war of Liberation against the colonial oppressors which we waged as one man demonstrated that Bangladesh is able to rise above religious bigotry and differences of caste and creed. Even though decades of obscurantism and religious fanaticism cannot be obliterated in one day, such bigotry will not be able to thrive on the soil of Bangladesh if communalism ceases to be a political weapon.²⁷

The state took steps to ensure equal citizenship to the Bengali speakers.²⁸ The ban on religious political parties reduced the chance of persecution, victimisation or discrimination based on faith. The state, at the same time, took steps to promote Islam—the religion of the majority. To establish his credentials as a Muslim committed to Islam, Mujibur Rahman established the Islamic Foundation and made Bangladesh a member of the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC). It was difficult for him to dissociate completely from Islam, the religion of the majority, in spite of his strong commitment to secularism. His compulsions were evident in the fact that he increasingly used Islamic idioms in greetings towards the end of 1974 to prove that he was not against Islam. He however, resisted internal and external pressures to remove secularism from the constitution, was firmly committed to it and strongly believed in the ideals that inspired the liberation war.

Although secularism gave hope to the Hindus, they faced the problem of the continued dispossession of their property as the Enemy Property Act came to be known as the Bangladesh Vested Property and Assets Order of 1972. The government provided a reward scheme based on volumes of sale proceeds of enemy property. It was not unusual for corrupt officers to list properties as vested property to increase their commission amount.²⁹ Although Mujib's intention was not to target the Hindus but the collaborators of the Pakistani regime, after the military regime assumed power—and with the legitimisation of religious political parties—the Act became an instrument to

of evadee and vested property, formally took over the ownership of these properties.

The military takeover in 1975 eventually brought General Ziaur Rahman to power. He sought a support base by courting Rightist elements. To prove his credentials he inserted *Bismillah ur Rahman ur Rahim*, removed secularism, and replaced Bengali nationalism with Bangladeshi nationalism as an euphemism for communal politics. He lifted the ban imposed on religious political parties and made it constitutionally mandatory to develop close relations with ‘fraternal Muslim countries’. These changes were approved by the parliament as a precondition to lift the martial law. The AL was weak organisationally. Its entire leadership was decimated in two military coups: the August 15 coup and the November 3, 1975 jail killings. The AL, then, was not in a position to resist these changes, which struck at the core of the very ideals that inspired the liberation war. The party staged a walkout when these amendments were passed. The relations between military regimes and religious political parties contributed to the gradual Islamisation of the secular constitution and patronisation of Islamic organisations.

With the rehabilitation of religious political parties who collaborated with the Pakistan regime and were responsible for the killing of Hindus and freedom fighters, the contour of politics changed. The state took steps to promote such culture as it perceived relevant to its Muslim heritage. Therefore, the formalisation of Islam as the state religion by General Ershad in 1988³² was a logical conclusion of the process that was initiated by the constitutional changes of 1977. With General Ershad, state-initiated violence against the Hindus became a norm, diverting attention from the demand for restoration of democracy.

The politics of ideology and the ‘vote bank’

In postcolonial nation states, the political mobilisation process often relies on appealing to the majority. Although Bangladesh has a strong and vocal secular constituency, given the competitive politics, usage of religious symbolism often undermines the secular character. It becomes easy to label a party as anti-Muslim, anti-Islam, and this automatically translates to pro-India—a tag that often becomes a political burden. Because of this, even professedly secular parties are forced to use Islamic idioms. The re-establishment of democracy allowed the Jamaat to legitimatise itself through the electoral process. The reference point of popular politics after the restoration of democracy was the role of various elements in the liberation war. Yet, the Bangladesh National Party (BNP) and the Awami League (AL) did not hesitate to court the Jamaat.³³

The debate on Bengali nationalism, with secularism as a major inspiration, and Bangladesh nationalism with religion as its core value, became part of the political contestation facilitating Jamaat’s alliance with the BNP, with which it had ideological congruence.³⁴ In this contestation the place of minorities became a critical point of discourse. According to Meghna Guhathakurta, state-instigated communalism, which was absent in the early years of Bangladesh, became a regular feature, used to reassert and re-emphasise its majoritarian character.³⁵ The BNP regime (1991–1996 and 2001–2006) had no ideological obligation to the minorities in an increasingly fractured polity. It turned a blind eye to the plight of minorities. The state supported violence against the Hindus in 1990, when rumour of the Babri Masjid’s demolition in India was spread by vested quarters, and in 1992 when the mosque was actually demolished; then, Hindu homes were attacked with the connivance of the state. The Hindus

1995 to register their protest. These attacks also re-emphasised the majoritarian character of the state, where the rights of the minorities can be violated without domestic political repercussion for the regime in power. In 1993, the BNP issued two orders in which the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) asked the commercial banks to control withdrawal of substantial cash by Hindu account holders, and not to reimburse business loans to the Hindus in the border areas, in a clear demonstration of how minorities are perceived as the 'other'. The underlying logic was that this was a state created exclusively for the Muslims in 1947 and for Bengali Muslims after 1977. Thus, Hindus should leave for India. Many Islamists deliberately refer to India as Hindu-India, as if to justify their stance. And the dwindling population (see Table 1) only indicates their lack of faith in institutions, which provide lip service to their marginalisation.

In the 1991 election, the AL in its manifesto mentioned that, if elected, it would restore the 1972 secular constitution. However, it was silent on this issue in the 1996 parliamentary election, because it felt that such promises led to its defeat in 1991. Its promise to repeal the Enemy Property Act led the BNP to mount propaganda that AL's victory will bring back thousands of Bengali Hindus from India to claim their property, creating instant fear in the minds of the Muslims.³⁶ Begum Zia also went to the extent of saying that an AL victory will put Islam at risk as *uludhhwani* can now be heard from the mosques.³⁷ In spite of clear ideological preference, the Hindus sometimes are intimidated to vote against their preferred party or are forced to refrain from exercising their democratic rights. The post-electoral violence of 2001 succinctly defined their precarious position – a pawn in vote bank politics. Even the AL does not hesitate to use intimidatory tactics.³⁸ Their limited constitutional rights, given the majoritarian biases, remain a legalistic formulation and do not impact on majority–minority relations at the societal level.

The 2008 election was conducted against the background of countrywide bomb blasts, suicide attacks and growing militancy. This regenerated a clamour for the restoration of the 1972 constitution and some of the civil society fora insisted on the holding of the long pending war crime trial.³⁹ The AL manifesto broadly defined the election as an opportunity to restore Bangladesh's 'core principles of

Table 1. Declining Hindu minority population, 1901–2011.

Census year	Total percentage	Hindus
1901	100	33.0
1911	100	31.5
1921	100	30.6
1931	100	29.4
1941	100	28.0
1951	100	22.0
1961	100	18.5
1974	100	13.5
1981	100	12.1
1991	100	10.5
2001	100	9.2
2011	100	8.5

Source: Bangladesh Population Census, 1981 (national series), Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, Chapter 6, pp. 73, 74, 75. Bangladesh population Census 2001 (provisional data), Chapter 8, pp. 65–69.

their manifesto had, 'All laws and other arrangements discriminatory to minorities, indigenous people and ethnic groups will be repealed'.⁴¹ The BNP both in 2001 and 2008 promised the minorities equal rights as envisaged in the constitution, and promised to provide more funds to the minority trusts.⁴² Yet, none of the two major political parties wanted to repeal Islam as the state religion, which the minorities thought was a source of majoritarianism.⁴³ Some in the BNP justified the party's alliance with the Jamaat as compensation for the votes of the Hindus, who were considered as the traditional 'vote bank' for the AL.⁴⁴ However, some senior leaders who fought the liberation war were not comfortable with the party's ties to the Jamaat, which was opposed to the liberation war.⁴⁵

The Left parties are generally vocal on the issue of secularism and minority rights. In their 2001 election manifesto the 11 Left parties very clearly mentioned their objective was to establish a secular society.⁴⁶ The Left political parties, especially the Jatiyo Samajtantrik Dal (JSD) through its cultural front *Samilito Sangskrutik Jote*, propagates secular values through street plays and dramas and they also actively promote *baul* music based on mysticism—an anathema to the Islamists. The JSD in 2008 promised, 'If we can play a role in forming the next government, we will attempt at banning religion-based politics, communalism and the edicts issued by the religious authorities'.⁴⁷ Unfortunately, they do not have a strong enough presence in Bangladesh politics to shape a secular order.

Both Jamaat-i-Islami and the Jatiyo Party talked of a blasphemy law and bringing other laws in line with Quran and Sunnah, and although they promise to provide equal rights to the minorities, the Jamaat emphasises Islamic research and propagation.⁴⁸ The religious political parties perceive them as a threat to their political interests. Therefore, it was not surprising when the Jamaat and its student wing the *Chhatra Shibir* targeted the minorities in spiraling violence in March this year. Since the minorities constitute less than nine per cent of the population, they cannot be ignored. A large number of the Hindu minorities vote for the AL in the absence of an alternative option. They also find that other parties are less committed to minority interests due to their ideological orientation. For these reasons, the AL takes the minority votes for granted. It is not surprising that the AL in the past had opened more madrassas than the BNP to appeal to the large Muslim electorate in an attempt to establish its Islamic credentials. Yet, minority votes cannot be ignored in any election.

In Bangladesh, the Hindus are too geographically scattered to effectively protect or represent themselves as a cohesive unit. For the first time after the 2001 election, the BNP decided to use the Hindu vote bank and patronised the Hindu Bouddha Christian Kalyan Trust, which was formed the same year. It has also appointed Gayeswar Roy, a Hindu, as joint general secretary to appeal to Hindu voters (see Table 2 for details on representation of the minorities in Bangladesh Parliament).

The Hindus' expectations of India has diminished over the years as India has failed to effectively pressurise or penalise regimes in Dhaka for its failure to protect Hindus.⁴⁹ The 2001 post-election violence and India's inability to intervene in a decisive manner to protect Hindus made the younger generation lose hope.⁵⁰ Many of young people feel that they cannot depend on India, as such dependence makes them weak. As a result, they are unable to protect their interests themselves. Moreover, Hindus have become victims of anti-India forces who consider them as 'India's agent'. However, in spite of their disappointment regarding India's role, it remains the most accessible destination for Hindus during communal tension in Bangladesh.⁵¹

Year of election	Total seats	Numbers
1954	309	72
1970	300	11
1973	315	12
1979	300	8
1986	330	7
1988	330	4
1991	300	11
1996	300	15
2001	300	7
2008	300	9

Source: 1970 data taken from ‘Silent Exodus of Minorities: Ekata Report in Communal Discrimination in Bangladesh: facts and documents’, published by BHBCOP, May 20,1993, p. 140; C.R. Dutta, ‘Condition of Religious Minorities in Bangladesh’, paper presented at the South Asian Conference on Fundamentalism and Communalism, Dhaka, June 1–2, 2001, p. 2. 2001 election data taken from Amena Mohsin, ‘Minority Rights’, in Hameeda Hossain (ed.), *Human Rights in Bangladesh*, ASK 2002, p. 246.

The secularists and liberal Bangladeshis who perceive radicalism as a threat to pluralistic culture are supportive of rights of the Hindus. Like the Hindu minorities, they are equally apprehensive about their future in the country. They feel that establishing a progressive society is intimately linked to minority rights and most importantly, the rights of the progressive/secular forces. Without plurality and equality a progressive society cannot sustain itself. Like the minorities, these small number of secular-minded people and organisations see the Bangladesh state as intimidating and hegemonic.⁵² In the past, violence and intimidatory tactics forced some civil society groups to lie low; their spirit and diligence is commendable in the context of a situation where an ‘Islamic’ or ‘un-Islamic’ labeling has become a method to suppress the voice of the secularists.⁵³

The politics of vested property: an instrument for the state dispossession of Hindu property

The Vested Property Act has been another mode of harassment of the Hindu minorities. This Act has facilitated dispossession through fear and intimidation. Societal response against the misuse of this Act is conspicuously absent because the land grabbers with the connivance of local authorities have sold these lands to the majority community after declaring them as vested property. Therefore, it is only the Hindu minorities who have raised the issue. Keeping the Hindu votes in view, the AL government in April 2001 passed a law titled ‘Vested Property Return Act’⁵⁴ which mandated the government to return the vested property to the owner provided he is a resident Bangladeshi citizen.⁵⁵ After the BNP came to power it amended the mandatory 90 days required for the government to publish the list. As a senior land ministry source explained:

While the government is responsible for taking over all land under the Vested Property Act, in reality it does not control 99 per cent of these lands. If the repeal is implemented, the government will have to return the lands to their rightful owners. But how will it do so when it has lost track of these lands?⁵⁶

ing committee on October 14, 2007, but of 6,45,140 acres of vested property, 4,45,726 acres of land has been grabbed by the encroachers, even though the government is the custodian of these lands.⁵⁷

What has been a clear weakness in the protection of minorities is the lack of institutional support to the Hindu minorities, even in instances when the courts have ruled in their favour. Sometimes a witness refuses to appear before the court and institutional support from the law enforcement agency is non-existent. In some cases the law enforcement agency joins hands with a land grabber and shares the spoils. According to a report in the *Daily Star*, besides making forged papers to prove their lawful ownership to the land, they specialise in bribing the relevant authority to advance their act of usurpation. The land ownership law says that those who occupy the land are the owners and 'this is one law that they readily take advantage of'.⁵⁸ The Hindus also have problems in selling their lands. The only buyers are Muslims. They fear that if they sell half of their land there is a possibility that the other half would be encroached upon in future. They also fear that land grabbers can join hands with relevant authorities to declare it as vested. Hindus are reluctant to invest in immovable property because it becomes a liability, in the case of wanting to migrate. In some other cases, the land grabbers in connivance with the law enforcing agencies forcefully occupy Hindu lands and declare it vested. Hindus are asked to pay money to get them released.⁵⁹

Response to a majoritarian state: the politics of Hindu minority organisations

The minorities are a significant factor in Bangladesh's ideologically divided politics. They are the most potent vote bank and to a large extent determine the political fortune of the two major parties.⁶⁰ Until recently, Hindu minorities were seen as the vote bank of the AL. Vote bank politics has now forced the BNP to seek Hindu votes to broaden its support base. Historically, Hindus were mostly members of Left political parties and were not supporters of the mainstream parties. Thus, they were unable to garner political clout given the narrow base of left politics. The Hindus have constituted minority interest organisations. At the same time they are also aligned to the two major political parties. The dynamics of minority political organisations needs to be understood in this context.

The *Hindu Bouddha Christian Oikyo Parishad* (HBCOP) was formed in 1988 as a reaction to the imposition of Islam as the state religion. It was supported by many Muslim civil society groups who had encouraged the formation of this organisation and are members of its governing board.⁶¹ The necessity of such an organisation was felt as the minorities realised that they have to play an active role to protect their interests rather than depending on the political parties. The political parties—especially the AL—was afraid to openly articulate the minorities' interest as they felt it will alienate them from the majority community.⁶² The AL is sympathetic to the HBCOP to further its electoral prospect. Though the HBCOP claims to be an independent organisation, nevertheless it supports the AL. The secretary of the organisation justifies it on ideological grounds.⁶³ As a result, they have not been an effective pressure group.

A parallel organisation, the *Hindu Bouddha Christian Kalyan Front* (HBCKF), was formed after the 2001 post-election violence. The agenda of this group overlaps with that of the HBCOP. Since the leaders of the *Kalyan Front* have aligned with the BNP led Islamic parties alliance, they have refrained from demanding the restoration of secularism in the constitution. This organisation does not have a conflict of interest

natory. However, they are critical of the 8th Amendment Act, which was introduced by the former military dictator General Ershad. The 21-point agenda of the HBCKF has nothing concrete to offer to the minorities.⁶⁴ Even their stance against the state religion does not find a mention in the party's objectives. Out of the 21 agendas only one pertains to vested property, which is an important issue for Hindus.⁶⁵ The bottom-line of their argument is that the marginalisation of minorities is inevitable given their numbers. However, participation in the government without ideological inhibition will ensure their safety.⁶⁶ One of the members, Gautam Chakravorty, who was earlier minister of state for water resources in the BNP government, was practically used by the BNP to mobilise Hindu votes for the party. The HBCFK aims at rebuilding temples and opening Sanskrit *pathshalas* to cater to the Hindu electorate in rural areas. Such objectives have great symbolic political value. This was projected as a success over the rival group. The Kalyan Front is more open about its political affiliation with the BNP than the HBCOP is with the AL.

Many educated Hindus living in urban areas consider both organisations as communal since they belong to particular religious communities. Due to social pressures, many minorities hesitate to publicly support these organisations, as they feel that their affiliation will bring social stigma and they would be branded as communal—a tag that the Hindus severely resist.⁶⁷ The youth perceive them as stooges of political parties. They feel that these organisations have not been able to safeguard minority interests, and so don't deserve their support. It is also felt that their safety depends on their social and personal relationships, not on their political affiliation with these minority organisations. Hindu minority organisations have remained confined to urban areas, limiting their influence. Lack of institutional support has also made them ineffective.

The fifteenth amendment to the constitution

The Supreme Court of Bangladesh in 2010 declared the 5th and 7th Amendments to the constitution that declared military coups illegal and null-and-void while hearing a writ petition against the earlier High Court judgment on this issue. This generated hope that the secular constitution of 1972 would be restored. However, given the political reality of the country, the AL decided to retain certain provisions of the constitution introduced by the military rulers. It retained *Bismillah-ur-Rahman-ur-Rahim* though it removed 'absolute trust and faith in the Almighty Allah' from the fundamental principle of state policy.⁶⁸ The provision of secularism was reinserted as Article 12, which now reads:

. . . the principle of secularism shall be realised by the elimination of (a) communalism in all its forms; (b) the granting by the State of political status in favour of any religion; (c) the abuse of religion for political purposes; (d) any discrimination against, or persecution of, persons practicing a particular religion.⁶⁹

Yet, contrary to this provision, Islam has retained its status as the state religion, which in itself nullifies equal status and equal rights to other religions. It has added other religions to Article 2A. It removed the part that reads 'other religion can be practiced freely' and in its place has inserted 'the State shall ensure equal status and equal right in the practice of the Hindu, Buddhist, Christian and other religions'.⁷⁰

are elected in the next election. The situation is that Bangladesh is increasingly becoming polarised after the Islamists went on the rampage in reaction to Delwar Hossain Sayeedi's conviction by the International Crime Tribunal, and painted the Shahbag movement as spearheaded by a so-called 'atheist'. This was followed by Hefajat-i-Islami's long march to fulfill its 13-point demands. It appears that the government is losing its ground to the Islamists when it arrested some bloggers.⁷¹ The government does not want to ban the religious political parties for two reasons. First, Islamic political parties are a reality and it would be difficult to do so after more than four decades of independence; second, the banning of religious political parties would free up space for more radical elements.⁷² The government argued that a 'compromise' has to be made, taking into account the 'ground realities'. The leftist political parties—the Workers Party and the JSD—although they voted in favour of the fifteenth amendment, recorded their note of dissent against some of the provisions. Many Hindus are not particularly happy with the provision of Islam as the state religion along with secularism. They feel that the AL in spite of its numerical majority is not sincere on the issue.⁷³ The President of the JSD, Hasanal Haq Inu, argues that the alliance needs to consolidate itself in power for another five years to bring any significant changes taking into consideration in the spirit of liberation.⁷⁴ One Bangladeshi diplomat, on condition of anonymity, aptly described the situation: 'The Islamists are like cancer who have now spread to the entire body politic of Bangladesh. It will require several sittings of chemotherapy to get rid of these cancerous elements'.

Approaches of the Hindus to state and politics: coping strategy

The creation of Bangladesh based on religious pluralism and linguistic monolithism has led to the emergence of a hegemonic state. However, giving primacy to the religion of the majority community, even while the state recognises other religions, creates space for religio-cultural hegemony, makes room for discrimination, nurtures social biases and undermines the concept of equal citizenship. To the minorities, their rights do not flow from the constitution but from the goodwill of the majority community. This is true in rural areas, where relations between the two communities are determined by personal relationships. The law and order mechanism is either not reachable at the local level or is biased towards the majority. The patronising attitude of the people flows from this hegemonic conception of state creation, first for the Muslims and later for the Bengalis, which has now been converted into a state for the Bengali Muslims. Discriminations are latent in urban areas but in rural areas it is more visible.⁷⁵ Hegemony also manifests itself in social interaction, the celebration of festivals and the manner in which examinations are conducted. For example: students were asked to write an essay on *Eid-ul-Fitr* or explain the ritual of Eid under a compulsory subject in the class 10 exam.⁷⁶ In Bangladesh Civil Service exams the Hindu candidates were even asked how many times they have visited India. Such instances were common during the rule of BNP-led four-party alliance.

Restoration of secularism, however, has given the Hindus some sense of hope, but they are equally disappointed and disillusioned. They are still uncertain about their future as they fear that growing radicalism will constrain the social space that is available to them. Many of them admit that the relationship between the majority and minority is undergoing a steady change and attribute it to various global developments. According to one analyst, 'a non-sectarian concept of citizenship was something

became more and more influenced by religious fundamentalism, sectarian identities of Hindu and Muslim have re-emerged in the arena of politics'.⁷⁷ Though they feel more secure during the AL regime they also feel that AL is playing the politics of religion. They dread the empowerment of religious parties. The emergence of *Jamaat-i-Islami* in politics has made the Hindus rethink their future. The Hindus are trying to cope with the changing political dynamics and negotiating for their rightful place in the state. There is a consensus among the Hindus that they need to work with the groups that believe in secularism, especially in urban areas, where the minority participates and plays an active role in social and cultural functions.

The Hindus feel that constitutional change needs to be accompanied by the institutionalisation of secular values. Due to the inherent bias in the system they do not see the state as a fair player.⁷⁸ The Hindus are targeted by the fundamentalists to emphasise that the state belongs to the Muslims as per the partition in 1947. Their common refrain to the Hindus is 'go back to your home' (meaning India). The greatest sufferers are Hindu women, who refrain from wearing anything conspicuous that will reveal their religious identity. They also choose to be silent spectators in discussions and debates.⁷⁹ They are easy targets for any gender-based violence and there are instances of forced marriages and conversions.⁸⁰

The introduction of democracy has politicised all issues, making it difficult for the minorities to express their opinion without being labeled ideologically. With the politicisation of roles of individuals, parties and groups in the liberation war, some people even question the role of Hindus during the war.⁸¹

Dilemmas ahead

Religion has been used in Bangladesh by both the political parties, and in many ways. The two mainstream parties have taken good care not to stir the hornet's nest by rejecting the values of Islam in politics. However, in a confessional state the space provided for such proactive measures become limited because the state belongs to the 'other' and the entitlement of the minorities as citizens flows from a patron-client relationship. In most cases a majoritarian state is sympathetic but not necessarily sensitive to minority issues. In the case of Bangladesh whose liberation has its own socio-political context, these sympathies are an outcome of ideological commitments. The Hindus are constitutionally marginalised and are relegated to the level of second-class citizens in political terms. While the AL is committed to secularism, vote bank politics makes them adopt populist measures. Thus they are not hesitant to use symbols that appeal to the Muslim majority. For example, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina had to refer to the Madina charter to justify secularism in the Bangladesh constitution.⁸² In the past AL did not hesitate to form an electoral alliance with the *Khilafat Majlis*, a fundamentalist party. This particular agreement was resented by the Hindus and the secularist lobby in Bangladesh, and brought into question AL's commitment to secularism.

The majority community is largely seen as a protector of rights of the minorities guaranteed by the constitution in spite of legal protection. Given the low level of institutionalisation of the South Asian states, such assurances of protection does not breed confidence for the minorities, where the state perceptibly belongs to the majority and the minorities are always subordinate partners. In the contested political space an

pics. Although a concept like secularism creates a basis for non-partisan citizenship, given the historical baggage, it does not translate into automatic rights or parity which can be legally enforceable. This makes the minority feel marginalised and unequal. Societal norms, relations with the majority, which is often coloured with the partition narrative, reminds them of their status in the state.

India has a very limited role in Bangladesh due to extreme political sensitivities. Hindu migration to India remains an alternative option. It provides them a sense of security at the psychological level, an assurance of a safe haven if things become too difficult for them in Bangladesh. The current political dynamics indicate, in spite of the existence of minority interest organisations, that the Hindu population does not have much faith in them as the guarantor of their rights and security.⁸³ This is evident from their diminishing numbers in the census. To sum up the situation of the Hindus, it would be appropriate to quote Beth Roy, who wrote ‘that nothing in fact was happening that constituted a threat [to the Hindus]. But underneath lurked a profound mistrust of the future’. The Muslims ‘believed themselves to harbor no ill will, and they experienced no tension. But from the other side of the divide, from a position of powerlessness, life looked quite different’.⁸⁴ The Hindus have struggled for equal political space since 1947 in Pakistan. Apart from the period between 1971 and 1975, Hindus have remained a political appendage to the politics of identity that has driven the two major political parties in Bangladesh. They feel unwanted by the BNP and the Jamaat-i-Islami and used by the AL. It might not be long before Bangladesh loses its Hindu minority population to India. This will have serious implications for the plural socio-cultural heritage and liberal values that many Bangladeshis long for.

Notes

1. The Shahbag movement was spearheaded by youths mostly belonging to the post-liberation generation in a spontaneous protest against a verdict of the International War Crime Tribunal that gave a life sentence to a convict belonging to Jamaat Islami. The younger generation perceived this as a lenient verdict, attributing it to a behind-the-scenes political deal. The Hindus are also seen as bolstering the Awami League support base and have a keen interest in the preservation of secularism in the constitution. This automatically makes them the ideological ‘other’ to the BNP and Jamaat, who believe in religion as a politico-ideological basis of the Bangladesh state. This ideological division has made the minorities vulnerable. For details see Smruti S Pattanaik, ‘What Does War Crime Trial Portend for the Future of Bangladesh?’, *Mainstream* (Bangladesh special edition), LI(14), March 23, at <http://www.mainstreamweekly.net/article4070.html>, (Accessed March 31, 2013).
2. Amena Mohsin, ‘Rights of Minorities’, in Hameeda Hossain (ed.), *Human Rights in Bangladesh*, Ain O Salish Kendra (Legal Aid and Advice Centre), Dhaka, 2002, p. 243.
3. For details of the verdict on the fifth amendment, see <http://www.dwatch-bd.org/5th%20Amendment.pdf>, and for the seventh amendment, see <http://www.dwatch-bd.org/7thAmendment.pdf> (Accessed April 3, 2013).
4. Bangladesh Population Census, 2011, Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, July 2012, p. 68.
5. The construction of a nation state based on religion and language is hegemonic. Both identities marginalise the identities of tribes such as the Chakmas, Marmas and Tripuris, who linguistically- and religion-wise do not conform to the conception of a Bengali nation state. However, in the context of Hindus, while the Bengali nation state based on language made them part of the nation, Islam as a component of the nation state set them apart as the ‘other’.
6. Rupert Emerson, *From Empire to Nation*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1960, p. 110.
7. The term ‘majoritarian state’ is used to denote a state which provides official status to the religion of the majority in the constitution and, as a result, promotes a particular religion. Though

8. To emphasise this point, the government appointed Mr Mandal, Minister of Law and Labour, as the temporary president of the Pakistan Constituent Assembly. The scheduled Caste Federation headed by Mandal had a strong presence in the Constituent Assembly, since they had formed an alliance with the Muslim League.
9. Partition left 11.4 million or 42 per cent of undivided Bengal's Hindu population in East Bengal. At the time of the partition, only 344,000 Hindu refugees journeyed to West Bengal. In 1948, around 786,000 Hindus migrated to India and in 1949 over 213,000 Bengali refugees crossed the border. See Tai Yong Tan and Gyanesh Kudaisya (eds.), *The Aftermath of Partition in South Asia*, Routledge, London, 2000, p. 144.
10. Samar Guha, *Non-Muslims Behind the Curtain of East Pakistan*, East Bengal Minorities Association, Calcutta, 1950, p. 33, as cited in Muhammad Ghulam Kabir, *Minority Politics in Bangladesh*, Vikas Publications, Delhi, 1980, p. 2.
11. For a discussion on evacuee property see Constituent Assembly of Pakistan, *Debates*, 1(20), April 6, 1951, pp. 897, 907, pp. 911–923.
12. Abul Barkat Shafique uz Zaman, Azizur Rahman and Avijit Poddar, *Political Economy of the Vested Property Act in Rural Bangladesh*, ALRD, Dhaka, 1997, p. 20.
13. The Pact, though aimed at eliminating harassment and intimidation, failed to provide any security. The incidence of actual violence was arrested, but intimidation through boycott remained as a more insidious form. There was much less evacuee property on the Indian side of the border, since the Muslims, who migrated to East Pakistan, did not possess much property. Thus, the compensation to the Hindus in material term was negligible. That they were still alive was the biggest compensation they received.
14. The prevailing misconception among Muslims is that Hindus are cunning, exploitative and were opposed to the idea of Muslims having their own state, as well as their right to education. In this, context many Muslims see the opposition to the establishment of Dhaka University as a Hindu conspiracy. Such biased opinion justifies and abets violence and justifies discrimination.
15. Basudeb Chattopadhyay, 'Impact of Noakhali Riots on Communal Situation in Calcutta', presented as part of a seminar on 'Fifty Years after Experiences of Decolonization, Partition and Independence, Bangladesh, India and Pakistan', March 12–14, 1997, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies, pp. 5–11.
16. For details see Bashabi Fraser, *Bengal Partition Stories: An Unclosed Chapter*, Anthem South Asia Press, London, 2008, pp. 32–36.
17. It was also clear that the Hindu minority wanted to have their politics and struggle within the geographical parameter of the present state. It was perceived that membership of Congress party would invariably link them to India and this was not conducive to their future in the new state. Moreover, the Congress nomenclature would have restricted the membership to Hindus only because in the pre-partition days the Muslims perceived Congress as a party representing the Hindu interest that was against partition and creation of a separate state based on religion.
18. Constituent Assembly of Pakistan *Debates*, 1(51), January 28, 1956, p. 2201.
19. The 1956 constitution was abrogated in 1958 militarily when Ayub Khan took over. The 1962 constitution declared Pakistan as the 'Republic of Pakistan'. However, due to protests by religious political parties, the first amendment to the 1972 constitution re-declared Pakistan as the 'Islamic Republic'. Bhutto in 1973 reserved the posts of prime minister and president for the Muslims and General Zia-ul-Haq, who usurped power through a coup, introduced a separate electorate system which was amended by General Musharraf, another military dictator in 2001.
20. Three of the minority members who argued against this provision are Mr Basant Kumar Das, Mr Peter Paul Gomez and B.K. Dutta. Some of the Bengali Muslim political leaders were also opposed to the 'Islamic' tag in the name of the state. The prominent among them were H.S. Suhrawardy and Mujib-ur-Rahman. The argument was that Pakistan should frame its constitution and define minority rights, keeping in mind the interest of Indian Muslims. If the Pakistan state is not sympathetic to minorities, the interests of Muslims in India will be put in jeopardy.
21. The Muslim League and the *Krisak Sramik* Party (Hamidul Haq) were opposed to a joint electorate. Later the bill for a joint electorate in the east wing was passed by 48 to 19 votes. The bill was introduced by Suhrawardy on 10 October 1956. The electorate bill (Amendment, 1957) provided for joint electorate for both wings of Pakistan. Initially in the proposed 1956 draft

22. For Suhrawardy's arguments in detail, see Constituent Assembly of Pakistan, *Debates*, February 1, 1956, pp. 2268–2269.
23. See Constituent Assembly of Pakistan, *Debates*, 1(60), January 31, 1956, p. 2267.
24. See Jinnah's speech on 'National Consolidation', given on March 21 to the people at Dacca, pp. 84–86. Also see 'Farewell Message to East Pakistan on 28 March 1948', in Quid-i-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah, *Speeches as Governor General 1947–1948*, Pakistan Publication, Karachi, pp. 108–119. Also see Md Nazrul Islam Mian, 'Language Based Nationalism and Birth of Bangladesh', *Journal of the Institute of Bangladesh Studies*, 16, 2003, p. 216. The first report of the basic Principles Committee was published in 1950 under the prime minister-ship of Liaquat Ali Khan which proposed Urdu as the only state language of Pakistan.
25. Meghna Guhathakurta, 'Amidst the Wind of Change: The Hindu Minorities in Bangladesh', *South Asian History and Culture*, 3(2), April 2012, p. 290.
26. Abul Barkat *et al.*, no. 12, p. 3. This study samples a total of 161 affected persons, 20 beneficiaries and 11 officials, who were all interviewed. Twenty-three case studies were conducted. This survey selected only small farmers.
27. Planning Commission of Bangladesh, *First Five Year Plan*, Government of People's Republic of Bangladesh, Dhaka, 1974, p. 1.
28. This hegemonic conception of nation state, based on linguistic identity, was questioned by the Chakma minority.
29. See 'Communal Discrimination in Bangladesh: Facts and Documents', published by Bangladesh Hindu, Buddhist Christian Unity Council, May 20, 1993, p. 95.
30. The amendment reads that enemy property 'shall be administered, controlled, managed and disposed of by transfer or otherwise, by the government or by such officer or authority as the Government may direct'.
31. For details of the Vested Property Act, see papers presented at the National Seminar on Enemy (Vested) Property Act, May 6–7 1994, Dhaka, organised by *Samprodaik Samprity Parishad*.
32. According to General Ershad, he faced compelling circumstances which led him to declare Islam as state religion. Among various factors he cited Pakistan, which had greater influence among the the Muslim countries, propagated that Bangladesh is not a real Muslim country as it does not have Islam as state religion. It was the pressure from the OIC countries that forced him to take this decision. Apart from this, he wanted to make the distinction between *Epar Bangla Opar Bangla* ('This side Bengal and that side Bengal'). The Bengali Hindu-dominated state of West Bengal is a major source of cultural insecurity for Bangladesh, which is reflected on the issue of national identity (from an interview with General Ershad, former president of Bangladesh, on December 28, 2007, Dhaka). However, people from other mainstream parties dismiss this view and argue that there was no such compulsion; instead, Ershad declared Islam as the state religion to co-opt religious political parties and he failed.
33. For elaboration on the politics played by the AL and BNP in their relations with Jamaat, see Mizanur Rahman Khan, *71 Parobarti Bangladeshbirodhitai Jamaat* ['Post-71 Jamaat Opposition to Bangladesh'], *Prathom Alo*, March 22, 2013.
34. The Jamaat chose to ally with the BNP in the 2001 elections, even though it fought jointly with the AL for the restoration of a caretaker government. From 1991 to 1996 Jamaat was preoccupied with organisation issues. Both the BNP and Jamaat were suspicious of each other. Jamaat preferred BNP due to its ideological rivalry with the AL (from an interview with Motiur Rahman Nizami, former Ameer of Jamaat-i-Islami, February 2010).
35. Meghna Guhathakurta, no. 25, p. 291.
36. Dr Muntassir Mamoon and Shariar Kabir, 'Resurgence of Fundamentalism and Condition of Religious Minorities in Bangladesh', paper presented at the conference 'Fifty Years After: The Experiences of Decolonization, Partition and Independence: Bangladesh, India and Pakistan', organised by Maulana Abul Kalam Azad of Asian Studies, Calcutta, March 12–14, 1997, p. 8.
37. This was the statement made in 1996. *Uludhhwani* is a kind of noise the Bengali Hindus make during celebrations and festivals, using their tongue.
38. 'Houses of Three Hindu Families Attacked for Skipping AL Meeting', *Daily Star*, March 28, 2013, at <http://www.thedailystar.net/beta2/news/houses-of-three-hindu-families-attacked-for-skipping-al-meeting/> (Accessed March 28, 2013).

- These organisations are sympathizers of AL but in 1993 the AL had not supported the public trial initiated by the EGDNC. The political preference of this group is limited and thus sometimes seen to be close to the AL. Many of them are supporters of the left parties in Bangladesh, who are alliance partners of AL.
40. For the Awami League 2008 election manifesto, see http://www.albd.org/english/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=177&Itemid=113 (Accessed April 1, 2012).
 41. Ibid.
 42. See BNP, *Manifesto*, Ninth National Assembly Elections, 2008, p. 27.
 43. The AL distances itself from state religion on ideological grounds. The BNP argues that they did not introduce Islam as the state religion, and thus cannot be held responsible. Liberal-secular minded people argue that Ershad established Islam as state religion when there was no such demand. Religious political parties were supportive of this clause at that time. They believed that Ershad was not competent enough to declare Islam as state religion (his own religious credentials being in doubt). In spite of Bangladesh Supreme Court judgment clause 2A pertaining to state religion has been retained with minor amendments.
 44. In an interview with Talukdar Maniruzzaman in Dhaka on 26 July 2007, Enaytullah Khan, editor of the *New Age*, June 19, 2004. The Awami League supporters dismiss this theory as bogus and talk of the ideological affinity that has forged the BNP to have an alliance with the Jamaat. It is important to mention that AL and Jamaat fought jointly against the BNP in 1996 to establish a caretaker government.
 45. This view was expressed during my interview with a senior leader of the BNP in April 2012 in Dhaka. This tussle was apparent in 2006, when the then finance minister Saifur Rahman threatened to resign due to a tussle between younger leaders led by Tarique Rahmat, Begum Zia's son and senior leaders over the direction of the party's future in the aftermath of bomb blasts. BNP's dilemma was evident in its approach to Jamaat during the 1991-1996 period.
 46. See 11 parties' election manifesto for the 8th Parliamentary election, *Nirbachani Ghosana and Angikar* ['Election Announcement and Manifesto'], pp. 10-11. These parties are the Bangladesh Communist Party, Ganoforum, Bangladesh Workers Party, Ganotantri Party, Bangladesher Samajtantrik Dal, Sramik-Krushak Samajbadi Dal, Bangladesh Samajtantrik Dal, Bangladesher Samyabadi Dal (ML), Ganotantrik Mazdoor Party, Ganoazadi League, and Communist Kendra (center). In an interview with Hasanal Haq Inu, April 5, 2012.
 47. 'JSD Eyes 'National Government'', December 15, 2008, at <http://dev-bd.bdnews24.com/details.php?id=120544&cid=2> (Accessed December 15, 2008).
 48. See the election manifestos of Jatiyo Samajtantrik Dal, p. 4 and Jamaat-i-Islami's *Nirbachani Istehar* ['Election Manifesto'], 2008, pp. 4 and 7.
 49. Some of the Hindu interviewees have suggested that Christians are not attacked because, if they are, western countries will come down heavily on Dhaka. India does not have leverage and is reluctant to act. Even the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government, headed by BJP prime minister, tried to underplay the violence against the Hindus in 2001. When Shariar Kabir was raising his voice against this violence (in what was then Calcutta), the Government of India refused to acknowledge the violence and migration of Hindu families to India. As a result, when Shariar Kabir returned to Dhaka, he was arrested by the BNP government for defaming the country. Sources for this prefer to remain unanimous; the interview was held on May 23, 2004.
 50. Brajesh Mishra was sent as the prime minister's special envoy to Dhaka. The NDA decided not to overplay the violence as it wanted to improve relations with all its neighbours. From an interview with Brajesh Mishra, July 12, 2010.
 51. Interview with Hindu youths, these students mostly from the Jaganath Hall, who are vocal about their views on India. The interviews took place in 2004, 2007 and 2011.
 52. Some of the groups are *Ekatturer Ghatak Dalal Nirmul*, a committee formed by Jahanara Imam to try the collaborators of the Pakistan army during liberation Samillito Sangskrutik Jote, etc.
 53. Bangladesh is one country where secular forces cut across the communal line. They are vocal. Some even dared to protest against the *fatwa* against Salman Rushdie. However, during the BNP-Jamaat regime, many preferred to be a little careful in articulating their views openly. Nonetheless, some human rights activists did not hesitate to form human chain to protect Ahmediya mosques, when the latter was threatened by a radical organisation which called

- multicultural and multireligious socio-political setting.
54. This Act stipulated that the government publish a list of the properties that is vested and is 'under government control'; accordingly, claims can be made legally within 90 days of the publication of the list. For details of this Act, refer to the *Bangladesh Gazette*, April 11, 2001, pp. 1301–1316.
 55. The deputy commissioners were made custodian of these properties until it is returned to the original owners. This has delayed the handing over of the properties to original owners. See *Daily Star*, 'Grabbers Gobble up Two-Third Vested Property', October 15, 2004.
 56. <http://www.db.idpproject.org/Sites/IdpProjectDb/idpSurvey.nsf/wViewCountries/CCD8B5BAAE59866EC1256DEE006638E1> (Accessed August 17, 2009).
 57. *Daily Star*, no. 55.
 58. Taking advantage of widespread corruption, false cases have been made in the name of victims. In this particular incident, 35 members of the minority community were made perpetrators of crime against the Muslims. Mominul Islam Shuruz, 'Caught in the Land-Grabber Grasp', *Star Weekend Magazine*, December 10, 2004, p. 17.
 59. Based on interviews with Hindus from Noakhali, Khulna, Mymensingh and Dhaka, March 2011. Also see Abul Barkat (ed.), *An Inquiry into Causes and Consequences of Deprivation of Hindu Minorities in Bangladesh through Vested Property Act: Framework for Realistic Solution*, PRIP Trust, Dhaka, 2000, pp. 139–208.
 60. According to a study, minorities combined constitute about 11 per cent of the electorate in Bangladesh. They constitute more than 20 per cent of the electorate in 50 of 300 parliamentary constituencies, 10–50 per cent of the electorate in 197 constituencies and more than 50 per cent in another six constituencies. This makes them a significant factor. See Mohammad Rafi, *Can we Get Along: An Account of Communal Relationship in Bangladesh*, Panjeree Publications, Doha, 2005, p. 183.
 61. Founding members are Begum Sufia Kamal, Prof Anisuzzaman, Prof Kabir Chowdhury, Justice K.M. Sobhan, etc.
 62. They are invariably labeled as 'Bharoter Char' (an Indian agent). For a critique of the role of intellectuals see the chapter on 'Bangladesher Buddhijibir Rajnaitika Bhumika' ['The Political Role of intellectuals in Bangladesh'], in Badruddin Umar, *Bangladesh: Rajnaitik Sanskruti* [Bangladesh: Political Culture], Afsar Brothers, Dhaka, 1997, pp. 116–122.
 63. From an interview with Nim Chandra Bhowmick, Secretary, Bangladesh Hindu Bouddha Christian Oikya Parishad who feels that they cannot negotiate with a party which has deleted secularism from the constitution. Though the Parishad knows that their organisational affiliation with Awami Leagues has not brought any political fruit but on ideological ground they do not have much option.
 64. Hindu Boudhha Christian Oikya Parishad, *Ghosanapatra* [Declaration], Dhaka, 2001, pp. 2–3.
 65. The organisation prides itself on holding Durga Puja in the Ramana Kali temple in 2004, the first such Puja held after 1971. From a discussion with the then minister of state for water resources Gautam Chakravarty. During the discussion it was found that most of his meetings pertain to his visit to various religious and cultural functions of the minority community and has nothing to do with the ministry he heads.
 66. For details regarding how the Front is different from Parishad and the Front's objectives see Gautam Chakravarty, *Harun-ur Rashid Samipesu* ['To Harun-ur Rashid'], *Dainik Inquilab*, October 15, 2004.
 67. This observation is based on interviews that were conducted with Hindus from different regions of Bangladesh in 2004, 2007 and 2011.
 68. Some political parties—such as the fundamentalist Hefajat-e-Islam spearheaded by Quami madrassa—are demanding the restoration of this provision, along with 21 other demands. See *Dharmadrohare Mrityudand ain pass o Shahbagi Nastik-bloggerder Kathor sasti Deete hobe* ['Government Must Pass Law Giving Death Penalty for People Against Islam and Nonbelievers Shahbag'], *Dainik Sangram*, section 2, 2013, p. 1.
 69. http://bdlaws.minlaw.gov.bd/sections_detail.php?id=367§ions_id=24560 (Accessed March 15, 2013).
 70. http://bdlaws.minlaw.gov.bd/sections_detail.php?id=367§ions_id=24549 (Accessed March 15, 2013).

- Bangladesh's war of liberation in 1971. Some of these bloggers were alleged to have posted blasphemous material pertaining to Islam and Prophet Mohammad in the web.
72. Interviews with Hindu students, teachers and other professionals working in NGO and media sectors. Interviews took place in September 2011 and between March 31 and April 7, 2012.
 73. Interviews with Hindu students, teachers and other professionals working in NGO and media sectors. Interviews took place in September 2011 and between March 31 and April 7, 2012.
 74. Interview with Hasanal Haq Inu, president Jatiyo Samajtantrik Dal and the present information minister of Bangladesh, April 4, 2012, Dhaka.
 75. Sometimes it is surprising to see newspaper headlines where Hindus express their gratitude for being able to celebrate Durga Puja peacefully. Why should gratitude be expressed for being able to observe one's right as equal citizen?
 76. This was the case during the BNP-led alliance government especially the question paper for 2004 exams. This was confirmed by some students who do not want to be named. One of the students even asked whether I could speak to him after his civil service exams, as he did not want to ruin his chances by speaking to an Indian before his interviews. This particular case pertains to 2004.
 77. Meghna Guhathakurta, 'The Nature of Bangladesh State', in Hameeda Hossain (ed.), *Human Rights in Bangladesh 2001*, Ain O Salish Kendra, Dhaka, 2002, pp. 25–26.
 78. For example: recruitment to the army and police. Hindus feel that there is less chance of them gaining these posts, and also that, even if they were to make it, they would not be promoted to higher positions.
 79. However, some of them said that even after concealing explicit symbols, it remains easy for others to ascertain from their appearance that they belong to the minority community. In many cases the youngsters were told by their classmates to go back to their 'own country'. Another interesting thing is that almost all Hindus are referred as 'Malaun', even in offices, as a means to humiliate them. This word refers to infidels. From observations based on interviews with Hindu students in Dhaka. For an interesting article regarding the kind of epithets used and the stereotyped image held by the majority, see Haridhan Goswami and Zobaida Nasreen, 'Discourse on Minority Representation: The Case of Hindu Religious Minority in Bangladesh', *Himalayan and Central Asian Studies*, 7(3/4), July–December 2003, pp. 85–100.
 80. One Muslim youth interviewed said that marrying a Hindu girl and converting her would bring *swabab* to seven generations.
 81. Interview with Enaytullah Khan, editor, *New Age*, June 19, 2004, Dhaka. The argument is that Hindus fled to India and did not contribute to the liberation of Bangladesh; therefore, they cannot have any say in the state structure or claim equality with the majority community on the matter of religion. This view is shared by religious political parties and some other intellectuals, who strongly argue in favour of the primacy of Islam in Bangladesh and underplay the Hindu role in liberation, to deny them equality.
 82. 'Hasina Vows to Maintain Secularism', *The Hindu*, April 15, 2013, at <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-international/hasina-vows-to-maintain-secularism/article4618704.ece> (Accessed April 15, 2013).
 83. Various interviews conducted from February to December 2004, June to September 2007 and February 2011 on whether India gives the Hindus psychological comfort and migrating there would be an option, the respondents said that migrating to India will always remain an option to them. Though at the subconscious level India provides psychological comfort of security, India's inability to protect the interests of the Hindu minority in Bangladesh has made their future strategies clear. The Hindus, especially the youths feel that they have to fight, with the support of secularists, for their rights.
 84. Beth Roy, *Some Trouble with the Cows: Making Sense of Social Conflict*, University Press Limited, Dhaka, 1996, pp. 193–194.