

## Hindus

### Profile

The Hindu population of Bangladesh suffered considerable as a consequence of political events since 1947. According to the official 1951 census for East Bengal (East Pakistan) Hindus consisted of 22 per cent of the total population of the province, a number that had been depleted to 15 per cent to 1991. Hindus form the largest religious minority group in Bangladesh. Since the beginning of the new millennium, Hindu population has suffered significantly at the hands of Islamic extremists resulting in exodus into West Bengal in India. Despite persistent persecution, Hindus have managed to yield some influence because of their geographical concentration in some regions, forming a majority in at least two parliamentary constituencies. Figures vary as to the population of Hindus in 2006- these figures range from 14 per cent to 16 per cent of the total population of Bangladesh.

### Historical context

Prior to the partition of India, Hindus formed a significant proportion of the population of Bengal. Immediately after the creation of Pakistan, many Hindu families migrated to urban pockets of West Bengal in Calcutta. A similar exodus took place at the time of the civil war in 1971. Although Islam was made the state religion of Bangladesh under the Eighth Constitutional Amendment in 1988 (thereby overturning the 1971 constitution which declared Bangladesh to be a secular state), Article 41 of the constitution recognizes other religions and gives citizens the right to practise and promote their religious beliefs. Further provisions of Article 41 guarantee an individual's right to refuse to practise a religion, or to be compelled to be educated in a religion other than their own. Sections 295, 296, 297 and 298 of the Penal Code deal with offences against religious places or practices.

Despite these provisions and the constitutional principle of non-discrimination, Hindus and other observers have alleged that there is covert and overt discrimination against Hindus as well as direct persecution of them. The Eighth Constitutional Amendment was seen by many observers as a step leading towards the imposition of shari'a (Islamic law) in Bangladesh, along the same lines as in Pakistan. Fundamentalist agitation directed against Hindus and other religious minorities has increased during the late 1980s and 1990s. Among the most serious incidents were clashes in November 1990 when, against a backdrop of communal disturbances in neighbouring India around the controversy over the Babri mosque, in Ayodhya, India, mobs set fire to Hindu temples in Chittagong and Dhaka. The mobs were whipped up by religious zealots and local leaders using Islam as a pretext for violence against Hindus; according to independent witnesses, police stood in silence nearby. It appears that in many cases the real reason for violence against religious minorities is to pressure them to leave their lands in an attempt to take over these lands.

The most explicit and officially tolerated means of depriving Hindus of their lands and properties has been the use of the Vested Property Act. The roots of the Vested Property Act can be traced to the Enemy Property Ordinance of 1965, promulgated as a consequence of the seventeen-day war between India and Pakistan. Companies, lands and buildings of Indian nationals and those residing in India fell

under the control and management of the Pakistan government. Although they were to be returned to their rightful owners after the war ended, the state of war was never officially lifted right up to the time of Bangladesh's independence in 1971, and India, at least for the time being, was not the enemy.<sup>1</sup> However, instead of abrogating the Enemy Act, the newly formed Bangladesh government reinforced its provisions with the Vested and Non-Resident Property (Administration) Act of 1974. In April 2001, the Awami League passed the Vested Property Return Bill (2001) according to the provisions of the new law, land seized under the Vested Property Act was to be returned to the original owners or their heirs. The government was obliged to announce the returnable property within the stipulated time period of 180 days. However, in November 2002, the BNP government amended the Vested Property Law, allowing the government an unlimited to return the properties to their rightful owners. This has meant that not only process of returning properties taken from Hindus has failed to materialise, further confiscations have been conducted under the existing Vested Property Act.

## **Current issues**

The Vested Property Act continues to be applied indiscriminately not only against the Hindus but also against other religious and ethnic minorities. In so far as the Hindus are concerned, their temples and land remains a prime target of confiscation. Hindus remain disadvantaged in access to higher education and jobs in the civil service and the military. Bangladesh's successive governments have refused to provide information on the ration of Hindus holding positions in the governmental services. In the most recent 300 seat Parliament, religious minorities held 7 seats - 4 for the Awami League and 3 for Bangladesh National Party. Hindus have by and large supported the Awami League party of former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, which they believe as holding secular ideals. Shiekh Hasina's party experienced a humiliating defeat in the 2001 general elections, resulting in the coming to power of pro-Islamic right wing Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) (in coalition with the Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh and Islami Oikya Jote). In the immediate aftermath of the elections, there were several reported incidents of widespread violence against the Hindu community and destruction of their property. It is reported that that several thousand Hindus have since 2001 fled into neighbouring India. The Indian government estimated in 2006 that there were 15 million illegal immigrants (many of these, Hindus) within the Indian borders. Hindu communities feared a repeat of this violent and destructive behaviour in the run up to the 2007 general elections generating a further exodus. With the continuing political uncertainty and the rise of Islamic extremism, Hindus also feared further persecution, forced conversions and forcible occupation of their properties.