



INTERFAITH RELATIONS IN BANGLADESH: CAUSES AND SECURITY IMPLICATIONS

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Abstract: Bangladesh, a country of around 180 million people, has a cluster of religions, races, cultures and ethnicities. Though the country is a Muslim majority one, it consists of people of other religious beliefs or faiths including Hinduism, Christianity, Buddhism and Animism etc. Although Bangladesh enjoys relatively peaceful coexistence of diverse religious groups, the coexistence of different religious groups has been at times disturbed by different communal conflicts which often raise question of the interfaith relations in Bangladesh. This study aims at exploring the causes and security implications of recent (between 2000 and 2014) conflicts on the interfaith status of Bangladesh in light of religious, political and economic motives associated with the persecutions of the religious minorities. As a part of the case-study based qualitative exploration, notable historical interfaith conflicts and events of the sub-continent are studied to find out any potential pattern, if any, these persecutions follow. The study finds that socio-economic, and political motives often play a pivotal role in igniting conflicts among different religious groups which often turns into interfaith issues as religion gets played in the conflict as a divisive issue. The study also finds that interfaith conflicts have both short and long term socio-economic and security implications which have both national and international significance.

Keywords: *Interfaith Relations; Religious Conflicts; Security Implications; Political and Economic motives*

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INTRODUCTION

The State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth. - *The Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh 1972.*

Bangladesh, a country of around 170 million people, has a cluster of religion, race, culture and ethnicity. According to the data from 2022 census, around

91.04% of the population are Muslims, around 7.95% are Hindus, the largest of the minorities, and the rest consists of Christians, Buddhists, and other ethnic religion believers (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2022). Bangladesh enjoys relatively peaceful existence among followers of each of the religions. Such coexistence of religiously diverse community can be termed as “Interfaith Relation” where Interfaith’ can be defined as ‘relating to or involving different relations or members of different religion’ (Oxford Dictionary, n.d.).

Despite a relatively peaceful nature, the coexistence of different religious and ethnic groups has at times been disrupted by different communal conflicts. Such communal conflicts or persecutions have historical traces even before the birth of the country. Bangladesh, being a part of the Indian-subcontinent, which is an inhabiting place for diverse groups of people with different ethnicity, religion, race and castes etc., time to time witnesses communal or religious violence. According to Ain O Salish Kendra (ASK, 2016) annual report, persecution on religious minorities witnesses an enhanced number of incidents, including killing and vandalization. Although the motivations for incidents may vary, the implications of such incidents on the religious minorities follow similar patterns, creating tension among interfaith groups. The persecutions on the religious minorities create anxiety and discomfort which may threaten the social peaceful and harmonious coexistence of these social groups in Bangladesh (Office of the High Commissioner United Nations Human Rights, 2015).

While some studies have been conducted on the overarching dynamics of interfaith relations, dialogues, and communal conflicts in the sub-continent, very little credible research is available on interfaith relations in Bangladesh and to look into the affairs from a holistic perspective which will include identification of the underlying motivation of notable interfaith conflicts and exploration of the socio-economic, political and security implications of the same for Bangladesh.

A stereotypical thought has been developed that persecution on the minorities are levelled to be religiously motivated which may disguise the main reasons of persecutions. Thus, it is important to study the motives of persecutions from an objective view to better analyse each event. As persecutions entail multidimensional impacts, it is also necessary to outline plausible implications of persecutions on religious minorities from social, political and security perspectives.

In quest of such attempt, previous religious persecutions are studied to find out the existence of non-religious motives like political or economic. Analysing the motives will create evidence on potential reasons behind persecutions on religious minorities in Bangladesh and assist in better understanding of any such future incidents. This work will also be important to foster the existing interfaith relations among different groups of the society.

OBJECTIVE AND SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The study aims at (i) identifying the state of interfaith relations in Bangladesh, (ii) identifying the presence of religious, political and economic motives in the persecutions on religious minorities in Bangladesh, and (iii) identifying the possible entailed implications of such events on society, politics and security of Bangladesh. In pursuit of the research objectives, the study aims at exploring answers to following research questions: (a) What is the current state of interfaith relations in Bangladesh? (b) What are the dominant motives behind religious persecutions in Bangladesh? (c) What are the social, political and security implications associated with these religious persecutions?

While the study takes important and relevant historical events into consideration, the study primarily focuses on major interfaith conflicts which took place in between 2000 to 2014. This timeframe is chosen to cover different political regimes and governments and explore interfaith relations across the timeline. The study also looks into notable regional events to better understand the events in study from a broader perspective. However, the study is not an exhaustive assessment of all interfaith conflicts in Bangladesh and thus, have some limitations in generalizing the finding. Non-availability of necessary and reliable information, non-cooperation of key interviewees, and lack of access to primary data and dependence of secondary sources for data collection are some of the limitations of this study. Besides, further quantitative analysis on the same can be done for further validating the findings of this research.

METHODOLOGY

Considering the nature of the study, “Qualitative” research methodology, one of the most useful approaches to be used in many different academic disciplines, traditionally in the social sciences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) has been followed for this research to gather in-depth understanding of the existence of non-religious motives behind the persecutions on religious minorities. An explanatory case study is used to explore causation in order to find underlying principles which in this case are very important to study the reasons or causes of recent persecutions on the religious minorities as well as the entailing implication of those events (Jon & Greene, 2003). Besides, case study method is also useful to analyse “persons, events, decisions, periods, projects, policies, institutions, or other systems” (Thomas, 2011).

Data used in this research is collected from both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include visiting the places where the persecutions took place as well as conducting interview of the victims over there. Case study-based research often “*relies on interviewing, observing, and document analysis*” (Denzin and Lincoln, 25). Expert interviews have also been conducted to collect insights of relevant field experts on interfaith issues. Newspaper articles, reports, research

papers and websites have also been consulted as a part of the data collection process.

For analysing data, a combination of qualitative methods has been used which include case-oriented understanding, secondary readings, conversation analysis, and sequential analysis of events etc. As this study incorporate the interview and opinions of the KIs as well as interview of the victims or witness of persecutions, conversation analysis gave opportunity to accumulate that information into the research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social identity is a significant part of an individual's self-concept derived from perceived membership in a relevant social group (Turner & Oakes, 1986) which provides a sense of belongingness and togetherness. In all their multifarious expressions and dimensions, the world's religions answer the individual's need for a sense of locatedness - socially, sometimes geographically, cosmologically, temporally, and metaphysically (Seul, 1999). Such belongingness to particular group means that each group differentiates among themselves and create comfort zone for each group. Thus, the social groups are created and religion and ethnicity have always been major criteria for human's social identity and segregations. The peculiar ability of religion to serve the human identity impulse thus may partially explain why inter-group conflict so frequently occurs along religious fault lines (Seul, 1999). On the other hand, Nguyen puts a more contemporary notion, bringing nation-state philosophy, and argues that there are connections between religion and ethnic conflicts; '...the religious composition of the population affects the likelihood of ethnic conflict within a nation-state' (Nguyen, 2008).

Historically, there have been many inter-group or inter-religion or communal conflicts where religion played an important role which are often termed as religious war. Such notable wars include the Muslim conquests (7th to 19th centuries) and the Christian military excursions against the Muslim conquests, including the Crusades (11th to 13th centuries) etc. If recent time conflicts are taken into consideration, some can be notable including, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the Second Sudanese Civil War etc. Charles Phillips and Alan Axelrod in their Encyclopedia of War has documented 1763 wars over all of which 123 (7%) have been classified to involve a religious conflict (Phillips & Axelrod, 2004). This indicates that a misconception of war is directly involved with religion and for religious motives.

Some scholars questioned the existing believe of religion being the sole catalyst for initiating or continuing conflicts and come up with fascinating insights. William T Cavanaugh is one of them, who in his book "Myth of Religious Violence" said "religious wars" is a largely "Western dichotomy", arguing that all wars that are classed as "religious" have secular (economic or political)

ramifications (Cavanaugh, 2009). However, this notion has also been criticised by some atheists and secular humanists who consistently make the argument that religion is the primary cause of violence and war throughout the history of mankind (Schumacher, 2014). Sam Harris, one of the notable authorities among the modern-day atheist says in his book “The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason” that faith and religion are “the most prolific source of violence in our history” (Harris, 2005).

Form a regional perspective, religion has always been a major component of identity of the people of the Indian Subcontinent. Prehistorically, it is claimed that this subcontinent was Hindu dominated, then Muslims from Central Asia came and preached Islam. Under the dominance of British, Christianity was promoted among the mass population. Besides, these religions, India is also the birthplace of other religions including Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism etc.

This region has witnessed many conflicts or persecutions that are said to have direct linkage with religion. However, interesting thoughts have been shared by historian Dr. Mubarak Ali, who claimed in his lecture on ‘Religious Tolerance in the Indian Subcontinent’ that ‘...what was once, the land of Sufi’s, the notion of ‘intolerance’ was introduced as a by-product of British imperialism’ (Ali, 2014). It also points fingers at the British theory of administration ‘Divide and Rule’ which is a process of gaining and maintaining power by breaking up larger concentrations of power into pieces.

However, the Socialist Party of Great Britain (n.d.) holds a different point of view, where they do agree that such division created a weaker India, saying that British invaders of India did not create Moslem-Hindu rivalry but they certainly made use of what they found. A divided India was a weak India Socialist Party of Great Britain (n.d.). This also gives a hint towards non-religious motives of such religious conflicts or segregations.

It may be noted that the term religious conflict in Bangladesh is often generalised as conflict between Hindus and Muslims. However, historical events show that there are several notable events where other religious groups, especially the minorities, are also victims of religious persecutions.

For instance, conflict between Hindus and Christians in India has been noted in the recent past as number of persecutions has increased as identified in the report of Human Rights Watch titled ‘Anti-Christian Violence on the Rise in India’. The nature of persecution included killings of priests, the raping of nuns, and the physical destruction of Christian institutions, schools, churches, colleges, and cemeteries which are somewhat similar to persecutions committed over other minority groups. There had been claims that thousands of Christians were also forced to convert to Hinduism (Human Rights Watch, 1999). Smita Narula says "Christians are the new scapegoat in India's political battles." Interesting enough that even in the same report, it is said that these persecutions are masked and used to achieve political and economic gain; the

report says, "...the exploitation of communal differences to mask political and economic motives underlying the attacks" (Human Rights Watch, 1999). Following the 2008 Kandhamal violence in Orissa against the Christian minority, Vatican raised its concern over the attack and called for a need to foster non-violence values among different religious groups' followers (Reuters, 2008).

While the conflict between the Muslims and the Buddhist are very rare, one notable incident happened in 2000's, the desecration of the Quran in a village in Kargil and subsequent clashes between groups of Muslims and Buddhists in Leh and Kargil town, Ladakh. Even though the conflict seems to be initiated due to religious reasons Sikand argues that religion is not sole motivating factors. He says, "The underlying causes of the simmering conflict in Ladakh are thus largely political and economic, and not religious as such, although this is how it has been sought to be presented (Sikand, 2006).

These events not just illustrate the nature of different conflicts but also raise pertinent question on the underlying motivation of the apparent religious conflict. Concerns over the disguised motivation of the religious conflicts have been raised by notable researchers such as Imtiaz Ahmad, Paul Brass, Ashutosh Varshney, Steven Wilkinson.

Social Scientist Imtiaz Ahmed argues that the political and economic factors lead to communal violence. He suggests that Hindu-Muslim violence needs to be viewed as an extension of general social conflict which includes inter as well as intra communal riots, caste violence and other forms of sectional upheavals. The emphasis placed on Hindu-Muslim conflict in case of social and communal violence comes but naturally considering the huge impact the various riots between the two communities have had on the Indian polity and society. Professor Imtiaz has also suggested future sociologist and political scientists to be aware of categorising communities as monolithic blocks.

Wilkinson (2003) provides statistical evidence to indicate proximity to an election and increase in the likelihood of a riot. Factors such as economic competition, Muslim population and percentage of refugees from Pakistan are not numerically significant in explaining the occurrence of a Hindu-Muslim riot even though computation shows that as the Hindu-Muslim balance of a town reaches 50-50, the possibility of a riot goes up a few notches (Wilkinson, 2003). Wilkinson has also identified that in a bi-polar state party system creates a potentially vulnerable situation for the minorities.

He has also tracked a linkage between party competition and ethnic violence claiming that high level of electoral competition and increase in swing voters can potentially reduce ethnic violence. He has reproduced an equation in the context of India which can be replicated for other countries (Wilkinson, 2003).

Party competition (↑) + Muslim swing votes (↑) = (↓) Levels of violence

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Scholars like Tambiah have also noted that processions often degenerate into rioting as a result of the manipulation to bring about some form of mobilisation in their favour.

Ashutosh Varshney provides a different interpretation of the issue and argues that the conflict between Hindus and Muslims is the terrible outcome of the absence of civic ties across communities. He also added that a multi-ethnic society with few interconnections across ethnic boundaries is very vulnerable to ethnic disorders and violence (Varshney, 2002). Varshney also asserts that Hindu-Muslim conflict is particularly an urban phenomenon and is concentrated in certain states and cities and termed them as 'riot-prone'.

Paul Brass, however takes a very straight forward step terming the communal riots as organised and produced by a network of known persons in the city or town. He compares a riot to a 'staged drama' (Brass, 2003). Brass defines these persons, while engaging in business, politics and cultural-religious organisations, as always willing and able to translate rumours and general discourses into local mobilisation. But Brass does not rule out the influence of historic relationship between Hindus and Muslims, thus he emphasises the broader cultural and psychological explanations of how the history or Hindu-Muslim enmity has, over time, produced a rich archive of mythical knowledge of 'the other' (Brass, 2003).

In the context of Bangladesh, which is a secular country from the very beginning, puts special attention to ensure freedom of individuals to practice of faith. However, the attacks and persecutions of religious minorities continue (Shakil, 2013). Shakil added that religious minorities being the part of bottom of the social hierarchy, have the least political recourse for which they witness discrimination and sometimes violence from the Muslim majority. But he has pointed his view towards religion saying that it (Islam) rejects such violence and it seems to be a serious misunderstanding and misinterpretation of Islam (Shakil, 2013).

Similar to Nguyen (2008), Amena A. Mohsin argues, "The Hindu-Muslim divide has been constructed and is being played upon and exploited by the political elites of the country most effectively and almost in a routinised manner for their own benefits in the name of "nation" and "state" (Mohsin, 2002). She also indicates the influential role played by the Partition of British India along religious lines (i.e., Hindu-Muslim) and the subsequent emergence of two nation-states turned out to be ominous for the religious minorities of the two states.

Apart from the political intentions to communal conflicts in Bangladesh, Abul Barakat (2000) has identified the existence of economic factors related to such persecution. Barakat in his research work 'Inquiry into Causes and Consequences of Deprivation of Hindu Minorities in Bangladesh through the Vested Property Act' have demonstrated that 925,050 Hindu households (40% of Hindu families in Bangladesh) were affected by the Enemy Property Act or known as the Vested Property Act. He added that Hindu households incurred a total loss of approximately 1.64 million acres (6,640 km²) due to the discriminatory act.

The issues of religion, politics and security became inter twined in South Asia (Mohsin, 2002). The conflict has had devastating effects on inter-group relationships. Apart from the loss of lives and property, it has profound influence on residential relationships, leading to new trends in the polarisation of communities (Fukshiwe, 2010).

Malitza has very specifically identified the social implications of religious persecutions saying, “weakens states common identity, which had controlled the centrifugal action of different identities. Consequently, a cultural conflict is erupted because culture is considered to be the totality of the values, beliefs, traditions and heritage that confer an identity on each individual. In its potential for explosive violence, culture could be compared to a nuclear reactor. A chain reaction would be started when a moderating influence of heavy water (a common project or authority) is removed. When the conflict reaches on certain intensity, a certain temperature, then violence is erupted. Violence can quickly destroy relationship between groups. Violence has generally been conceptualized as a degree of conflict rather than as a form of conflict. It is not a quantitative degree of conflict but a qualitative form with its own dynamics” (Mircea, 2001).

It can be assumed that economic threats are supposed to be associated with persecutions but Dr. Pickup and Dr. Goodwin argues the other way saying that feelings of economic threat did not increase. Public perceptions of individual economic threat (i.e., fears that individuals’ own economic prospects will worsen) did not increase after the riots. Similarly, public perceptions of collective economic threat (i.e., fears that the national economy will worsen) did not increase after the riots. This provides evidence that people were not primarily concerned about the economic impacts of the riots (Mark & Matthew, 2011).

The physical security of the minorities is almost always closely linked to the vulnerability of the minority women, since they become easy targets of sexual harassment of the dominant community. It is little wonder, therefore, that any member of the minority community will first think of sending their sisters and daughters to safety (Guhathakurta, n.d.).

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES OF THE INDIAN SUBCONTINENT

Despite a relatively peaceful coexistence among the followers of these religions, interfaith relations have often been disrupted by conflicts among religious groups in the Indian subcontinent.

Gujarat witnessed a dreadful religious violence in 2002 centering the Muslim involvement in burning a train filled with Hindu pilgrims. The train was ignited on 27 February 2002 causing the deaths of 57 Hindu people including women and children (Jaffrelot, 2003). Agitated Hindu, blaming Muslims for the train-casualty, in retaliation started rampage, rape and killing for more than two months. During the riot, it is estimated that over 2,000 people, mostly Muslim were killed (Mishra, 2012), some 20,000 Muslim residents and business establishments were completely destroyed (New York Times, 2014). While the Gujrat riot has been associated the Godhra train burning, the causes of the fire remain largely disputed (Metcalf, 2012). Some had suggested that the attack on the train was a planned incident, the narrative has been challenged by many suggesting that several inquiries found that the incident to be an accident rather than being a planned conspiracy (Nussbaum, 2008). There has also been question regarding the role of law enforcement agencies, political leaders and the media which some believe have worsened the already aggravated situation (Prasun, 2006).

In the communal riot, as per official sources, the death toll was 790 Muslims and 254 Hindus while 223 more were reportedly missing (BBC, 2005). But some independent sources claimed that more than 2,000 Muslims were killed in bloody communal riot (Mishra, 2012). It is estimated that Muslim owned 100,000 houses, 1,100 hotels, 15,000 businesses, 3,000 handcarts and 5,000 vehicles were completely devastated (Davies and Gloria, 2005). About 125,000 displaced Muslims were obliged to move into relief camps (Jaffrelot, 2003).

Babri Mosque Communal Riot of 1992 is often considered as one of the worst religious violence in the Indian-subcontinent since the partition of 1947. In December 1992, over 1.5 million (Tally, 2002) Hindu Karsevaks (volunteers) gathered at the site of the Babri Mosque with a view to reclaiming the land known as Ram Janmabhoomi. A large number of Karsevaks on 6 December 1992 set upon 16th century mosque with sledgehammers, grappling hooks and axes and within a few hours, the mosque was entirely demolished (New York Times, 2014). The Muslim community around India became infuriated following the destruction of historical mosque. Concurrently, the Muslim community brought out protest processions in some states of India leading several months long communal riot between Hindu and Muslim communities.

Several months' long bloody communal violence commencing from December 1992 took the lives of minimum 2,000 people, most of whom were Muslims. During the riot the estimated property damage was \$3.6 billion (Steven I, 2006).

The riot is widely considered as major factors behind the 1993 Mumbai bombings, causing at least 257 deaths (Babri Masjid bloody aftermath, 2011).

A terrible anti-Sikhs communal riot was spread out in India after the assassination of Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards on 31 October 1984. The riot ensued in Delhi and more than 3,000 Sikhs were brutally killed there (Bedi, 2009). The wave of anti-Sikhs uprising erupted unrestrainedly throughout the country causing the massacres of more than 8,000 innocent Sikhs people (Pandey, 2013). Several investigation reports including the report of Central Bureau of Investigation, the main Indian investigating agency, revealed that the organised violence was patronised by the political leaders while law enforcement agencies played indifferent role to restrain the agitated mob. Rajiv Gandhi who became Prime Minister after his mother's assassination attempted to rationalize the violence saying "when a big tree falls, the earth shakes" (Baweja, 2009). The official sources of Indian government claimed 2,700 deaths in the three-day (1-3 November) riot. The Congress led government didn't take appropriate measure to stop the violence consequently more than 20,000 people had to flee away from the Delhi city (Sharma & Shankar, 2013).

In 1964, a communal riot broke out between the Muslim and the Hindu communities in East Pakistan which is linked to the alleged theft of Prophet's hair. The hair was then found not an authentic one rather an artificial one. According to Bhattacharyya, approximately, 200-300 Bengali Hindus were killed at the Launce Ghat and around 300 Hindus were either killed or injured at Mongla port by Muslims (Bhattacharyya, 1987). The persecution also took place in Dhaka. Rayerbazar area was one of the most affected one, where minority Hindus lived, were attacked by the Bihari Muslims from Mohammadpur and the Noakhali Muslims from the Hazaribagh tanneries. According to Das, 96 Bengali Hindus were killed in the massacre. Many women were raped and many young girls were abducted (Das, 2010), and thousands of Hindu refugees fled to India to avoid persecution (Huda, 2009).

Apparently, it may be concluded that the main contributing factor for this riot was the religious sentiment of the Muslims in the East Pakistan. However, this has also been questioned, saying '...The Ayub government patronized this riot with the aim to divert the anti-government sentiments of the people'(Albd.org, n.d.). When the exodus started, the Hindus had no other option but to leave their properties and flee to India. Their assets were subsequently misappropriated by vested quarters of the Muslim leadership (Ray, 2005).

FINDINGS

While exploring the events of religious persecution during 2000-2014, it was noticed that the major persecutions took place somewhat on and right after the

elections where the alleged political affiliation of the minorities were considered to be one of the primary motives of religious persecutions.

For instance, following the 8th National Parliamentary Election on 1 October 2001, supporters of the winning political party had reported to have attacked the Hindu minorities because of their perceived support for the opposition party during the election. Reports indicate that the worst affected areas have been in Barisal, Bhola, parts of Pirojpur, Khulna, Satkhira, Gopalganj, Bagerhat, Jessore, Comilla and Norsingdi. Fear of backlash created a severe atmosphere of tension in the village. Several hundred Hindu villagers left for fear of being attacked and Hindu children would not attend schools. Hundreds of Hindu families have fled across the border into India because they have been attacked or threatened. According to Agence France-Presse of 29 October 2001 they have either ended up in camps or gone to their distant relatives (Amnesty International, 2001).

Some other significant incidents include attack on Hindus of Basantapur village on 08 May 2002, attack on two Christian villages Foiljona and Kadamtoli in Pabna, attack on Hindu minority community living Laxmipur village at Moulvibazar district on 20 April 2002, where religious minorities were subject to persecution by the religious majority as an aftermath of the election and for their presumed political preferences.

While the nature of persecution on the religious minorities has weakened the interfaith relations among different religious groups, the presence of non-religious motives in many of the religious persecutions on minorities is very evident. For example: persecutions after the election in October 2001, has direct relationship with election and thus politics. As most of the newspapers and international media have emphasised that the minorities have been attacked as they have voted or supported the then opposition. In other cases, it is recognisable, that the minorities are attacked and threatened so that the attackers can achieve economic benefit or political advantage or in some cases beastly satisfaction.

A similar pattern has also been witnessed during the 10th parliamentary election in 2014. One notable incident is the Abhaynagar violence which took place on the election day on 5 January 2014. Malopara under Prembagan Union of Abhaynagar (Jessore district) is a small village where lives about 107 Hindu families. Although majority of the Prembagan union is predominantly supporter of the opposition party but Malopara village people ideologically support the ruling party. However, the interview reveals that peace and harmony existed there, and there were exchanges of greetings during various festivals.

Around 250 activists of the opposition party, armed with sharp weapons and sticks attacked the Hindu inhabited Malopara village, where they vandalised more than 30 houses and set another 10 on fire (The Daily Star, 2014). The

violence of Abhaynagar shares some similar characteristics as previous persecutions that took place during and after the 8th Parliamentary Election in 2001. However, this event has also unfolded the possible role of both inter and intra political party conflicts in causing the persecutions of the minority groups.

The inter party reason for the attack on the Malopara people was to punish their participation in the election and supporting a candidate other than the opposition party. Their participation has been a particular problem since the opposition party envisaged to boycott the election all together and resist throughout the country. On the other hand, interview reveals an existence of intra-party conflict which stems from the re-demarcation of the constituency of Jessore – 4 prior to the election. Such re-demarcation has put one potential candidate an advantage over the other and interview suggests that the disadvantaged candidate may have a role to play in inciting the violence. The interview claims are further substantiated by report by Asian Human Rights Commission that the disadvantaged potential candidate held an election campaign meeting at Sundali Primary School ground adjacent to Chapatala village and allegedly threatened Hindu families with dire consequences if he were to lose the election to his Hindu counterpart (Asian Human Rights Commission, 2014). It is critical to highlight that the interviews have mentioned that the interfaith relations between Hindu and Muslims at Abhaynagar was very strong until the election time.

Contrary to these incidents, Ramu violence indicates different dynamics to religious conflicts in Bangladesh. The 2012 Ramu violence refers to a series of attacks on Buddhist monasteries, shrines, and houses of Buddhist inhabitants in Ramu Upazila in Cox's Bazar District by local Muslim mobs on the midnight past 29 September 2012. The mobs destroyed 22 Buddhist temples and monasteries and 50 houses in reaction to a tagging of an image depicting the desecration of holy Quran on the timeline of a fake Facebook account under the Buddhist male name Uttam Kumar Barua. Precisely, an image depicting the desecration of holy Quran was posted on the wall of Uttam Kumar Barua's Facebook profile by an unidentified person using a pseudonym. The violence later spread to Ukhia Upazila in Cox's Bazar District and Patiya Upazila in Chittagong District where Buddhist monasteries and Hindu temples were targeted for attacks (abc news, 2012). An estimated 25,000 Muslims participated in the violence directed at Buddhists and Hindus and over 300 people were arrested in connection to the attacks (bignewnetwork.com, 2012).

Torun Borua, one of the interviewees of the Ramu incident, provided insight about the timeline of the persecution that occurred on 29 September 2012. He, like other interviewees agreed to the allegation that, a defamed picture of Holy Quran was found on the Facebook page of Uttam Barua. However, he added that he was tagged by someone else with a pseudo name, which is also mentioned in mainstream media as well (Anam, 2012). Interestingly, he mentioned that the actual event took place on 18 September 2014, and Uttam

Barua requested Faroque and Alief to remove the image from his account. However, instead of removing the image, they played a vital role in circulating the issue among others. These events raise multiple questions regarding the delayed occurrence of the violence as well as involvement of other important players like Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO) or local politicians.

Apart from the religious sentiment, Ramu violence indicates the existence of other non-religious motives which may cause the violence including political motives.

The first question is why Uttam Kumar Barua and others were purposefully tagged in the picture at the first place by an anonymous person. Some interpreted that 'tagging' of the picture in the account of a Buddhist youth was part of the plan.

The second question is regarding the outburst itself. Generally, conflict arising for interfaith issues is a spontaneous response or outburst of the people for being hurt religiously. In Ramu incident, the persecution took place on 29 September 2012 with a gap of eleven days. It logically means that the incident did not stimulate Faroque and Alief instantly, which does not match with previous incidents on religious persecution. Such belated response also raises question whether the whole attack on the Buddhist community was meticulously organised which will then also explain the accumulation of huge protesters of around 25,000 within hours in a relatively remote place like Ramu.

According to the probe body, a meeting was held on September 28, 2012 at Tofail Ahmed's (Upazila Chairman of Nahkanchari and a relative of Moktadir Alief) residence a day before the actual violence took place (The Daily Star, 2014).

Lastly, the interviews show interesting facts on the presence of religious sentiment as a reason for this persecution. The participants were asked about the possible motives of attacking the Buddhists, and all of them shared that the persecution included participation of whole range of Muslim community across all major political parties (The Daily Star, 2012). The role of the law enforcement agencies was questioned by some (The Daily Star, 2012).

The events that happened during the time frame of 2001-2014, caused multidimensional impacts. They can largely be categorized into social, political and security implications. While economic impacts are also significant, it has not been the focus on the study.

Such persecutions created a deep sense of uncertainty, social tension and social distrust among different social groups. Vandalism of houses and shops had affected the victims economically. Forceful seizure of land or properties had made many minorities to migrate to other countries especially to India. As a result of these persecutions, people were scared to move and do their normal day to day activities. People were also afraid to send their children to school as

they were anxious about security. Sexual violence against women of minorities had a traumatising effect on the mind and life of the victims and their families. Many of the victims sought freedom by committing suicide. Ramu incident has also drawn international interest mostly in a negative way, defaming the image of Bangladesh. More than 100 monks in Burma have demonstrated in front of Bangladesh Embassy to protest attacks against Buddhist temples (The Scotsman, n.d.).

In a democratic country like Bangladesh, everyone is given the right to support any political party they want. However, these persecutions that were brought about on and after the general election might have marginalized the minority groups to express their political views. Besides, a long-term distrust might have been built on the political system of Bangladesh where government, to some extent, could not protect the rights of each group.

As the interviews have revealed, insecurity and panic had led many to flee from their home. Children could not attend their classes due to security issues (Dhaka Tribune 2015). Women were afraid in getting raped by the miscreants. Such individual insecurity caused a national level insecurity among the general people particularly among the members of other minority groups. Forced migration in the neighboring country may also cause inter-country security issues.

DISCUSSION

Experts have also very specifically termed the interfaith relations in Bangladesh to be very strong compared to the neighboring country. Major Shamsul Arefin said ‘...interfaith relations in Bangladesh are very strong in comparison to India’. A similar comment was given by Professor Imtiaz Ahmed, ‘... We share our diverse culture, language, dress, food and everything unlike any other part of the world. Perhaps no modern state can handle multi-dimensional challenges of faiths. But Bangladesh is reasonably doing well’.

The interviewees of the persecution in Abhaynagar and Ramu have also shared similar thing stating that relationship among different religious groups in those particular areas had always been very peaceful and cordial. Tarun Barua, like other interviewees, has specifically mentioned that the Buddhist community of Ramu was living harmoniously side by side with Muslims for last several generations. Shree Mohon Kumar Sharker, General Secretary, Radha Krishna Mandir, Malopara, Chapatola, Abhaynagar also stated that the Muslim elites and political leaders used to maintain very congenial relation with them and often shared joy of religious festivals.

In almost all the cases, there was existence of non-religious motives which can imply that the persecutions were influenced by non-religious reasons. However, non-religious motives do not rule out the existence of religious reasons. Some

of the identified non-religious motives include political hatred and pressure, illegal grab of lands, robbery, rape and sexual violence etc.

Political Hatred

Majority of the persecutions that took place in between 2001-2014 are somehow related to politics and elections, except for the Ramu violence. The minorities are often persecuted for their perceived alliance towards a certain political party.

Specific Pattern

Increase in persecutions on the minorities during or after the election period also matches with Wilkinson's claim that proximity to an election sharply increases the likelihood of a riot or violence and shows specific pattern of events.

Bi-Polarity of the Political System

Wilkinson's model of the relationship between party competition and increase or decreases of swing voters among the minorities can explain some of the phenomena. If these two variables are taken into consideration, according to the model of Wilkinson, levels of persecution should increase, like the way we are witnessing trend of persecutions on the minorities.

Party competition (↓) + Minority swing votes (↓) = (↑) Levels of violence

Intra-party Issues

Religious political parties are alleged to be responsible for the violence of Abhaynagar, however, the existence of intra party conflict probably oiled the fire and turned it into a religious persecution as many political analysts think so.

Illegal Land Grabbing

Land grabbing is probably the most significant economic reason that has been motivating many religious persecutions. For example, the houses of Dulal Debnath and Jitendra Debnath were attacked on 20 April 2002 at Moulavibazar and their lands were forcefully captured.

Looting and Robbery

Many of the persecutions included vandalism on the property of the minority groups which are followed by looting and robbery. For example, on 9 May 2002 the property of the "Ashram" has been looted and taken away by the attackers. The Abhaynagar event was not an exception from looting and robbery.

Kidnap and Sexual Violence

In many cases, the female representatives of religious minority groups were kidnapped, tortured and raped by the miscreants, which is one of the reasons for religious persecutions.

Plotted Violence

The Ramu incident provides evidence for multiple non-religious motives. The timeline for the arson is very significant as the persecution occurred 11 days

later than the defamation of holy Quran which may imply that even though the outbreak could have happened earlier, they took time to prepare and attack deliberately. Abhaynagar incident may be given highlighting preparation of arson like cycle disc. All these possibilities also restate the view of Brass who perceives the communal riots or religious violence as ‘Staged Drama’ (Brass, 2003).

Persecutions on the religious minorities also have overarching impacts on the societal harmony, security and politics. The major implications include loss of lives and injuries, vandalism and loss of properties, forced migration, disturbance in daily life and education, social hatred, social insecurity, threat to national security and so on.

Loss of Lives and Injuries

Loss of lives, injuries, and post persecution trauma are some common impacts of the arsons against the religious minorities. Representatives of the minorities are often beaten, tortured, body parts amputated or even killed during the persecutions. Women are the poor victim of such persecutions as they are often tortured and raped brutally.

Vandalism and Loss of Property

Vandalism is the most common form during any persecutions. For example, the Abhaynagar incident included vandalism like destroying the houses and shops of the Hindus, looting valuable materials etc. Previous persecutions like the attack on the Christians on 26-27 February 2002, had witnessed massive vandalism by the attackers who are usually armed.

Forced Migration

In many cases, the Hindus are forced to migrate to neighboring countries for safety. Religious persecutions may force many other to migrate as Mr. Subrato Sharker was saying “Maybe we have to leave for India for survival but we do not want to do that. We cannot leave our generations’ home and property for no good reason.”

Hindrance to Normal Life

Persecutions create social tension among the victims which directly hinders the normal social life. In many cases victims are forced to take shelter in different area for safety. For example, during the post electoral persecutions of 2001, Ziodhara village was attacked where several hundred Hindu villagers left for fear of being attacked and Hindu children would not attend schools.

Social Insecurity

Persecutions create a sense of insecurity among the victims and in the neighboring area. Such raise of social insecurity is prevalent in all the persecutions. For example, the 2012 Ramu violence had created immense insecurity for the Buddhist community of Bangladesh.

National Security

Persecutions on the minorities can raise regional tension which may ultimately turn into a national security concern. In case of Bangladesh, persecutions on the minorities have drawn the attention of neighboring countries. The 2012 Ramu violence has brought about some national level security issues. On the other hand, persecution on the Rohingya was also alleged to be one of the motivating factors for the Ramu incident. Thus, the persecutions bring insecurity not only to individual level but also to national and regional level.

CONCLUSION

Persecutions on the religious minorities are often generalised to be taken place due to interfaith conflict and differences. However, this study proves that the traditional interfaith relation in Bangladesh is very strong where communities of different beliefs and faiths coexist in a peaceful and harmonious manner. As compared to the neighboring country like India and Pakistan, Bangladesh has been able to maintain healthy interfaith relations. However, from time to time, people belonging to the majority religious group, Islam, have attacked the minorities with different motives. This study contradicts with the common perception on persecutions on the religious minorities that religious difference is not the sole motivating factor in plotting these persecutions. As a part of the scope of this study, it investigated the existence of different political, social and economic reasons from non-subjective point of view considering the historical perspective and different time frames. The study finds that persecutions on the minorities are politically or economically motivated rather than sole religious reasons. Many of the persecutions are planned and plotted with wit to serve non-religious purposes. Persecutions often follow a pattern in different timeframe indicating the possible likelihood of repetition in the future, i.e. during or after national election. Grabbing land and properties is the most common economic motivating factor.

Actions create impacts. Each of the persecutions can bring about short term and long-term implications on Bangladesh's social, political and security aspects. Attack on the minority groups basically questions the fundamentals of the country as stated in the constitution. Arsons and attacks not only shake the long build social harmony but also decay the future coexistence of diverse groups in Bangladesh as such violence ignites social distrust and insecurity among the social groups. Religious persecutions threaten the national security and international relations of the country. Criticism and condemnation of the neighboring countries and international community are pointing fingers regarding Bangladesh's capability in preserving the rights of the minorities. Besides, relationship with the neighboring country may face difficulties as a result of such persecutions.

Prosperity of the country will depend a lot on stable social structure and peaceful and harmonious existence of the diverse group. Deepening general understanding among interfaith groups is half of creating a harmonious society where stopping the persecutions on the minorities is the complimenting half. If both are achieved, a prosperous inclusive Bangladesh can come into reality.

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