

The Erasure of Minorities in Bangladesh: A Pattern of Power, Intolerance, and Displacement

By Amal Datta, CPA | Director, Australian Federation for Ethnic and Religious Minorities in Bangladesh (AFERMB) | Human Rights Activist

The Silent Disappearance of Ethnic Communities

The story of minorities in Bangladesh is not one of occasional violence or sporadic discrimination; rather it is a decades-long, systematic process of erasure. Beneath the surface of cultural festivals and token representation lies a hard and haunting truth: Hindus, indigenous peoples, Christians, and Buddhists in Bangladesh are being pushed toward extinction. And that occurs not only through violence, but also through law, policy, and a national narrative that increasingly deny their place in the country's social fabric, and their need and existence as an integral part of and participant in the civic society.

In 1947, the Hindus in East Bengal (which became Bangladesh in 1971) were nearly 30% of the total population. Today, they account for less than 8%. This demographic shrinkage is not the outcome of natural migration or economic upheaval, but it is the consequence of systematic hostility: repeated waves of communal violence, discriminatory legislation, official indifference, and a state-sanctioned narrative that falsely portrays minorities as outsiders. In truth, these communities are the sons and daughters of the soil, with ancestral ties to Bengal that predate the arrival of Islam in the region.



From Secular Ideals to Religious Supremacy

At its birth, Bangladesh envisioned a secular, inclusive future. The 1972 Constitution enshrined secularism and promised equality for all citizens. But that vision began to unravel quickly. The cruel murder of Bangladesh's Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, with his entire family and relatives on 15 August 1975, by a group of rebellious army officers, changed the political landscape and hence the ideology of the subsequent ruling parties. Secularism was the first principle to be slaughtered.

In 1988, a constitutional amendment declared Islam as the state religion. Since then, successive governments—whether through encouragement or complacency—have allowed political Islam to creep into public life. Blasphemy allegations

followed by violence, land seizures, forced evictions, temple demolitions, forced conversions, and the targeting of indigenous communities, particularly in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, have become distressingly common and frequent.

These developments in Bangladesh are not unique. They mirror a global pattern of religious majoritarianism in Muslim-majority nations where unrestrained political power converges with fundamentalist ideologies. The results are invariably devastating for minorities.



A Global Pattern of Erasure

Consider Pakistan, where Hindus and Sikhs made up 15–20% of the population in 1947. Today, they constitute less than 2%. In provinces like Sindh and Punjab, forced conversions, abductions, and temple desecrations are common. Afghanistan, once home to over 100,000 Hindus and Sikhs in the 1970s, now has fewer than 100—driven out by discriminatory taxation (jizya), mob violence, and the systematic destruction of their places of worship.

In Iraq, the Christian population has collapsed from 1.5 million in 2003 to fewer than 200,000. Towns have been emptied, churches repurposed as military bases, and the Yazidis were subjected to genocide—mass killings, enslavement, rape, and destruction of temples. Egypt's Coptic Christians, constituting 10% of the population, suffer constant harassment, church burnings, and displacement, while state policies and legal structures relegate them to second-class status.

In Iran, the Bahá'í and Zoroastrian communities are subjected to daily discrimination, denied access to education, employment, and burial grounds. Under Omar al-Bashir's regime in Sudan, churches were razed and non-Muslims killed, leading to South Sudan's secession. In Nigeria, Boko Haram and Fulani extremists have unleashed massacres and bombings upon northern Christian communities in a demographic war of attrition.

Turkey's Armenian, Assyrian, and Greek Christian communities have been virtually eliminated since the Ottoman era. In Istanbul, the Greek population fell from about 100,000 in the 1950s to just a few thousand today. Jewish communities across the Middle East and North Africa, including in Iraq, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen, were expelled or destroyed after 1948 through state complicity and social violence.

In Indonesia and Malaysia, blasphemy laws, religious persecution, and temple demolitions are on the rise. And in the Maldives, non-Muslims are not even allowed to become citizens.

This is not an isolated trend. It is a recurring, documented pattern: wherever a dominant Islamic identity fuses with unchallenged political power, pluralism is sacrificed.



Bangladesh: A Nation at the Edge

Bangladesh may not be a theocracy, but it is steadily advancing along this dangerous path. Even without the formal structure of a religious state, the country employs the same tools of religious erasure seen elsewhere.

Blasphemy allegations are used as political weapons to silence dissent and terrify minorities. This tool is being used very frequently at present across the country to simply persecute Hindus through mob violence, resulting in imprisonment without trial, killing or evicting them, where their properties, businesses and other belongings are being grabbed by the mob leaders. Grabbing of temple lands with impunity has become a common occurrence. Minority girls are abducted and forcibly converted—acts that are rarely prosecuted. Political participation is limited, and minority voters often face disenfranchisement. The growing cultural narrative frames Bangladesh as a nation belonging solely to one faith, slowly delegitimizing the presence of others.

These are not signs of temporary “communal tension.” They are the machinery of long-term displacement. The infrastructure of erasure is being laid—through fear, intimidation, and silence.



A Fading Opportunity for Change

With each passing decade of inaction, the dream of an inclusive Bangladesh slips further away. Token representation at public events and multicultural festivals can no longer disguise the structural marginalization being carried out in plain sight. Through neglect, silence, and complicity, the state has become an enabler.

Bangladesh now stands at a crossroads. It can choose to return to the secular, pluralistic ideals upon which it was founded, or it can follow the path that has already led other nations into religious apartheid and cultural extinction.

Will the World Wait Until It's Too Late?

The question today is not whether minorities in Bangladesh are at risk. They are obviously at risk. The point is not “whether” but “how fast” the minorities in Bangladesh will be erased. And the question for the world is: Will it acknowledge the crisis only after these communities have vanished?

The erasure of religious and ethnic minorities in Bangladesh is not accidental—it is deliberate, and it is unfolding in slow motion. The international community, human rights defenders, and Bangladesh’s own civil society must recognize that this is a battle not just for minority rights, but for the soul and sustainability of the nation itself.